

Carolina and Duke team up for Vietnam trip

By SERGIO TOVAR

Lauren Prussing, an outside hitter for Carolina's volleyball team, spent part of her summer teaching children in the Mekong River Delta of southern Vietnam to try to get children excited about higher education through sports.

Prussing went to Asia through Coach for College, a program developed by a former Duke women's tennis player that took 10 student-athletes each from UNC and Duke to Vietnam. Each athlete paired with a college student majoring in physical education from the host country to teach children ages 11 to 15 five sports—badminton, basketball, soccer, tennis and volleyball—as well as different subjects such as health, English, leadership and science.

"Even though we couldn't have an actual conversation with the kids because they couldn't speak much English, we just had a connection," Prussing said. "When we left they were all crying and were so sad—I guess just seeing that tells us that we made a difference in their lives."

Prussing first heard about the program from her friend Austin Smith, a member of the Carolina women's tennis team.

"She told me she was going and immediately it sounded like something that I wanted to do because it is working with children and sports—which are two of my favorite things," Prussing said.

The 6-2 senior said she gained a greater appreciation for everything she has here at home, especially with all the perks she receives as part of being an athlete at Carolina.

"The kids in Vietnam play soccer barefoot, kicking around an empty water bottle because that's all they have," she said. "But their attitudes were great. They were grateful and excited all the time."

Prussing said the children taught her to have a more optimistic attitude even when things are not going well, something she said she could utilize on and off the volleyball court.

"They're very poor and they don't have very much, but every day they came to the program so happy and so excited to be there," she said. "Just seeing that tells me that even though I might be stressed out with school or how volleyball is going that I should be more positive because there are bigger things."

During her three and a half weeks in Vietnam, Prussing said she became interested in Vietnamese culture—especially the food, which she admitted she had been nervous about before getting to the country. Prussing said she learned a valuable lesson while in the country.

"People are people. Everyone is basically the same, just the way that people go about doing things is different," she said.

The Highlands Ranch, Colo., native hopes this new positivism will translate into more wins for the Tar Heels this year. The team, which finished 2007 with a 15-16 record and missed the NCAA Tournament, was picked to finish fourth in the conference behind Clemson, Georgia Tech and Duke. Prussing said her goal for this season is to win the ACC championship.

"I think we all have very high expectations for ourselves," Prussing said. "We



LAUREN PRUSSING

COACHING THE KIDS Prussing and Duke's Amanda Granson take a break with some of their students in Vietnam.

haven't done as well as we have wanted for the last couple of seasons so we're coming out here with something to prove to everyone else in the conference—that we're really a great team and that we're out here to compete."

Prussing, who lead the team in kills last season and was named to the All-ACC Academic team, has had some of her best performances on the court against Duke. She tied a career high of 17 kills her sophomore year and set a career high in blocks with five last October against the Blue Devils.

But she said the rivalry between the Tar Heels and the Blue Devils did not affect the relationship that the athletes had while in Vietnam, even though they would tease each other about their schools every once in a while.

"When we were over there we were so separated from Durham and Chapel Hill that we weren't paying attention to the rivalry and instead we were more focused on the kids and making a difference with them," Prussing said.

"I still hate Duke, but I just don't hate the people."

Prussing said the athletes from the rival schools became such good friends that they are planning to have a reunion soon to catch up on what has been going on since they returned to the States.

Besides Prussing and Smith, other Carolina student-athletes who participated in the program were Bekah Brinkley (volleyball), Andi Drabot (rowing), Carly Dressler (rowing), Colleen Farley (women's track and field), Shawna Kelly (gymnastics), Daniel Llamas (wrestling), Colette Lowe (women's golf) and Jessica Wacker (women's fencing). ■

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