



KHOA TRAN

Outside Hitters

People come here for a variety of reasons; volleyball usually isn't one of them. But when two former American college players came to do just that, the Vietnamese volleyball world appeared anything but ready. Words by Will Peach.

TWO TOWERING ALL-AMERICAN girls, Jessica Roberts and Crystal Palmer, came to Vietnam at the behest of their former Vietnamese-American volleyball coach.

Having played in the prestigious Division 1 league of US college volleyball, the girls were set to take Vietnam's National Championships by storm. But then, on the eve of the tournament's final stages, with US\$27,500 prize money set to win, no teams appeared willing to take them on.

"We don't understand why there was all this excitement and encouragement for us to come," says 24-year-old Crystal, who won a scholarship at East Tennessee State and played professionally in the Croatian leagues.

"There wasn't even really a chance to

try-out," adds 26-year-old University of Pittsburgh graduate, Jessica.

◦ Setting the Ball

Meeting for the first time in June at Taipei International Airport, the pair was scheduled to hook up with Jessica's former coach Tuong Nguyen at his home in Go Vap in Ho Chi Minh City.

From there, the plan was to try out for teams preparing for the southern leg of the tournament and get recruited into a team in time for the finals in mid-July.

"We didn't come here as tourists," says Crystal, who was set to use her time here as a warmer ahead of playing professionally in Sweden in September.

"Teams were apparently very excited

we were coming over and even sent cards greeting us," adds Jessica, an elementary school teacher back home.

But aside from experience and training, the opportunity of playing in Vietnam brings another big lure: money. Foreigners playing here can expect to make anything from US\$2,000 a month, although the salary is negotiable in terms of team sponsorship and the standard of the players.

American college stars like Jessica and Crystal could have potentially made even more.

◦ Middle Blocker

But for all the money involved in the sport, organized volleyball in Vietnam happens only twice throughout the year, with two

tournament style round-robin events played in May and July.

"There are twenty-four men's and women's professional teams, twelve of which are in an upper league and twelve in a lower, with relegations and promotions between," explains coach Tuong Nguyen.

The teams competing in the final leg held in Tan Binh District have come from all around, with only one team, Thep Viet, based in Saigon itself.

According to the pair, the sport is definitely gathering momentum. A ticket to the games costs between VND15,000 and VND30,000, making it an accessible spectator sport for most of the population.

"They have a great following for volleyball," says Crystal. "If you watch the games, the stands are filled."

Tuong, on the other hand, believes that the sport isn't going anywhere fast. He argues that the Vietnam Volleyball Federation is largely antiquated in its methods: "The Vietnamese have great athletes but the direction the sporting authorities go by is way behind in time."

As a result the standard of play seems to suffer. All three agree it is much lower than that in America, Europe or even neighbouring Thailand.

"Last year the US college team St. John's, who are one of the weakest teams in Division 1, only lost to the Vietnamese national team by a few points. That gives you some indication of the disparity," adds Tuong.

But whether six-foot tall Jessica and five-eleven Crystal would have dominated during the tournament remains unseen.

While they acknowledge that "Asians play good volleyball and are great passers and setters," neither of them came across any Vietnamese players in the European or American leagues.

"I've only met two Vietnamese people in volleyball, period, and they were both coaches," says Jessica.

The picture appears the same from both ends. Had they been picked up, the pair would have been the first American players ever to have graced a professional court in Vietnam.

◦ The Defensive Position

The Vietnamese teams, however, only saw great risk in using the foreigners with the main reason being economics.

As teams rely on disparate budgets set by corporate sponsors and prize money, securing two foreign stars would have come at a great expense.

But then, as Tuong suggests, there are cultural issues too.

"They (Vietnamese teams) don't want to bring a foreign kid here and they play really bad. They'd rather bring a Thai kid or a Chinese kid because they're Asian, also. You cannot have a white kid come here and do badly because everybody would pick the team apart," he explains.

The two women, however, had very limited opportunity to showcase their skill in the first place. The try-out they received lasted only four hours and never actually involved any practice game.

"We hit a ball for about an hour and then watched the rest of the team. We came back the next day and did the same thing,"

recalls Jessica.

Adds Crystal: "It's hard to think that we wouldn't be effective when everyone else was jumping lower than us and not hitting as hard as us."

Despite the disappointment of their initial trial, the pair remained enthusiastic over further opportunities. It was only until Tuong rang around other teams in the hope of securing another trial that their fate became obvious.

"It seems all the other teams knew about them and weren't willing to take the chance," he says.

◦ Future Positioning

This freeze and fear of change looks likely to hinder national volleyball in Vietnam for some time to come. The incident is enough to deter any other western foreigners from trying out inside the country.

But the question remains — if even the weakest teams in the league are unwilling to take a chance on experienced players, just how is the sport to move forward competitively?

To a former college and club coach like Tuong, the answer lies in education.

"The federation must go as a group to America or even Thailand and learn to appropriate their models," he explains. "There are definitely things they can use to make the sport better."

Sadly for Jessica and Crystal, who have since left after being interviewed for this article, the present state of Vietnamese volleyball only had them caught in the net. **WV**

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(Left: Crystal
Right: Jessica)



PHOTOS: RICO GONZALES