

Gaumont Casias a smash hit on world stage

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BELA HORIZONTE, BRAZIL—Remember that guy with the crazy hair on the Bears volleyball team a couple of years ago? Man, could he ever jump. Helped them win that last championship in 2005.

Well, Alexandre Gaumont Casias isn't your little secret any more, Alberta. His explosive hits (and explosive hair) have started to make his name known around the world.

Gaumont Casias left the Bears in 2006 to train full-time at the Team Canada Volleyball Centre in Winnipeg. Last month, the recently converted right-side player got his first taste of top-level international competition.

He wasn't expected to play much in the World League games, but got his chance early on when one of the senior players, Paul Duerden, was injured.

Gaumont Casias was on the court for most of Canada's second home match against Finland, and started both road matches in Korea. He was outstanding on the attack and was one of the leaders in World League scoring and hitting after the first four matches, even though he really only played in three.

The rest of his game—blocking and digging especially—was fairly far behind the international standard, but things were cruising along well for the 22-year-old. Then, during a weight-training session just after arriving in Finland, Gaumont Casias tore a pectoral muscle.

He stayed with the team for the matches in Korea and also for the next ones in Brazil, but when it became clear that a quick recovery wasn't going to happen, Gaumont Casias was taken off the roster for the final matches back in Canada.

Even 30 consecutive hours of travel to Jeonju, Korea (250km south of Seoul), wasn't able to dampen Gaumont Casias' excitement for the 2-3 June contests against the home team. Guess that's what happens when you haven't played a match in eight months.

Canada's first road game was played in front of a charged crowd of over 5000 that filled the Jeonju Indoor Gymnasium past regular capacity. Gaumont Casias was an impressive attacker, scoring a game-high 23 points.

But it was the one that got away that weighed on his mind; in the second set, Gaumont Casias had the chance to put Canada up 24-22, but a miss led to a 26-24 loss and ultimately a four-set defeat.

"I'm sorry, but [when] you're the right-side, those are the balls you need to put away," Team Canada head coach Glenn Hoag said after that match. "His play on hitting has been fine, but that's the only thing. Otherwise, hitters hit at him because they know he's not a very good blocker. I can support what he does well, but he needs to learn what to do at those key moments, and he needs to improve the rest of his game."

This wasn't news to Gaumont Casias though, who recognized he made errors on over-bumps, missed digs and a couple mis-hits.

"If you look at my stats, I'm doing well, but the most disappointing part is when I messed up, I messed up at crucial times," Gaumont Casias said. "Yesterday when we were leading, I got blocked twice in a row. Maybe I got nervous;

maybe I went for a safer shot. Like Glenn said, it's just attitude."

But it was his massive kills that were remembered by the crowd after the game, or at least by the legions of screaming teenage girls who mobbed him for autographs and photos on his way from the stadium to the team bus.

"You almost needed a bodyguard or two to clear the way," Gaumont Casias said, noting the treatment was a bit overwhelming for an "Average Joe" from Marieville, QC. "I know they're just high-school teenage girls, but they're going after you, yelling your name, and then giving you gifts, coming to the hotel, writing you letters, and then you just touch their hands and it's like the end of the world for them. It's pretty unreal."

There was an ear-shattering screech to the cheers when Gaumont Casias was introduced for the second match, and he played a starring role again for his newfound schoolgirl supporters—some of whom pledged to change their study plans to come to Canada to be with him.

He recorded his third-straight game-high point total, this time with 18 kills. Although Canada lost in straight sets, Gaumont Casias managed something personally he had never done before.

"When you hear all those high-performance athletes playing a big game saying, 'I didn't realize the crowd was there,' you think, 'Bullshit!' I've seen the crowd in all my volleyball games, spotted a beautiful girl or a family member, but yesterday's game I was in my own world," he said. "I saw pictures and on TV when we came back, and the place looked packed. I didn't even realize it. I didn't see the crowd, and that's never happened to me before. I've got to try to focus like that for all my games now."

Little did he know, it would be several months before his next game: after another 30 straight hours of travel, the team was back in the weight room, and either when he was doing bench press or pull-overs, he felt a lot of pain near his right armpit.

"Even if I tried to swing, I just can't. I cannot lift my arm. It's really painful," Gaumont Casias said after he had to watch from the sidelines as Canada lost again in three and four sets.

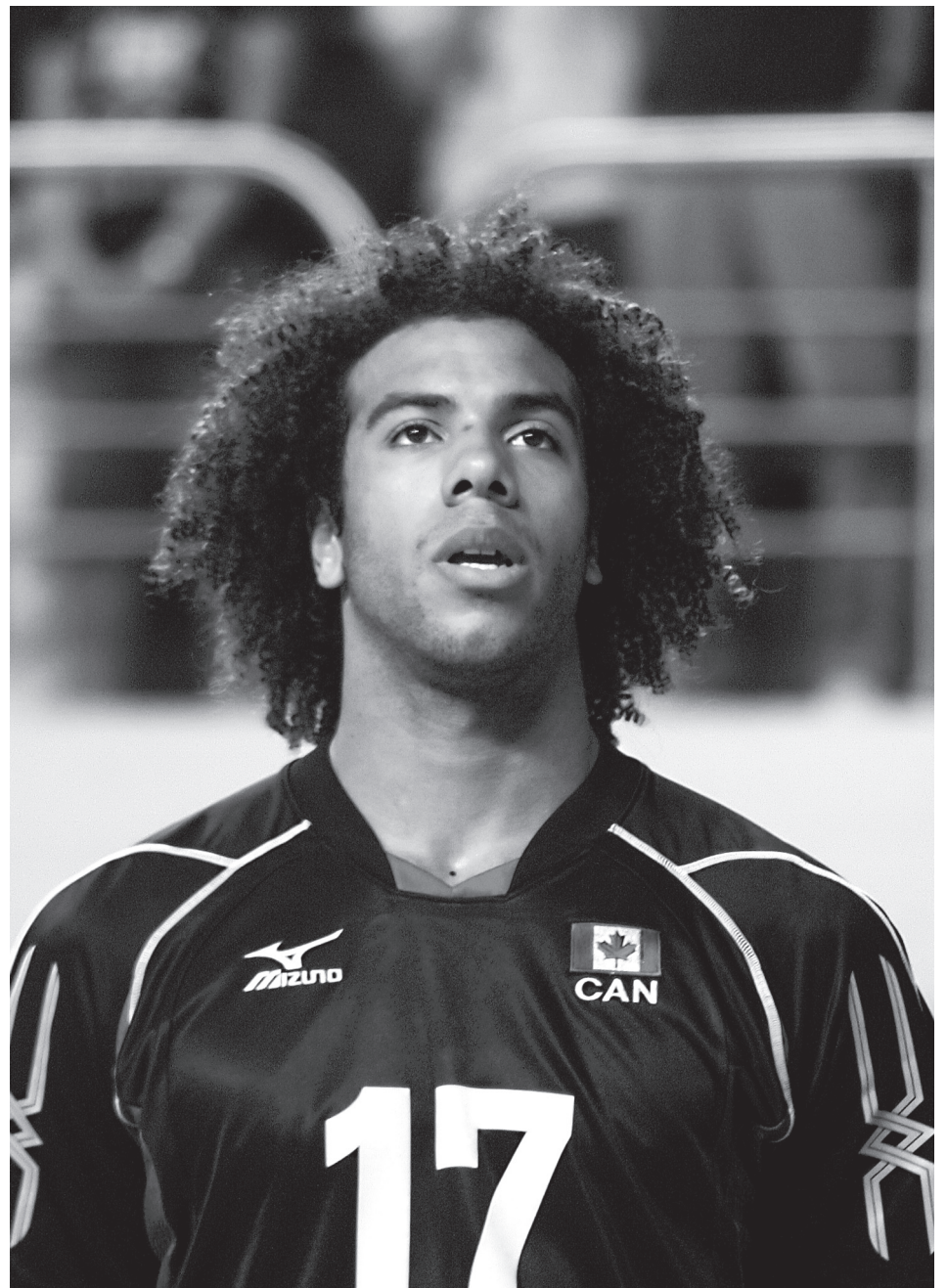
"We played like bantams there. I wish I could've been on the court to try to get the guys fired up because it seemed like they were just going through the motions. It was very disappointing to see that from the team."

Gaumont Casias continued to practice and warm-up for the matches, but could only swing with his left arm. The one upside was that he had plenty of time to work on what he and his coach saw as his weak points.

"That's the only thing I can do right now," Gaumont Casias said. "I don't know how long I'll be out for, but those next few weeks, that's what I'll have to do—just dig and block."

What was really bugging him, though, was facing the reality that he likely wasn't going to get to play against Brazil, the current champions of every major international volleyball competition.

"I would do so much to be able to play. It's like a dream to play the best team, but I can't, so it's just heart-breaking," Gaumont Casias said. "Right now, it's like I'm living the dream, but I can't enjoy it because I'm not part of it."



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OH, CANADA Former Bear Alexandre Gaumont Casias now plays for the senior national team.

Gaumont Casias did get some good news in Brazil, though: it was while he was there that he found out that an Italian club team, Marmier Lanza Verona, wanted to sign him to his first professional contract.

"I'm so excited. My dream was to play in Italy one day," he said, joking that his hairstyle; a five-year project, should net him an extra \$10 000 for promotional purposes. "I'm such a fan of the country, the culture, the rhythm of life there, and I love the language. I think it's a beautiful, romantic language."

Gaumont Casias has also received a contract offer from Turkey—apparently the volleyball world took note of his performances at the start of World League.

"I talked to my sister yesterday and she's like, 'Wow, it's unreal. You're just from a little town and you grew up to be a good enough athlete that you can make your life by playing a sport,'" Gaumont Casias recounted.

Though he didn't get to play in front of the 18 000 Brazilian fans in Belo Horizonte, there

was a great consolation prize for staying with the team. He got to experience an all-you-can-eat *churrasco* restaurant, where they bring barbecued meat out on swords.

"I think I got meat drunk there. I woke up at 7am and had a huge stomach ache," Gaumont Casias said. "It was just a meat party. It was meat, more meat and then more meat—filet mignon to goat to lamb to any of the best meat, and you can eat as much as you want. It was the best restaurant in the world."

Volleyball has taken Gaumont Casias to many places around the world now, but at every stop, he still thinks plenty about the track that got him there. That means you're still in his heart, U of A.

"All the players on this team, we work so hard. I've made so many sacrifices to get here—I left my family to go to Alberta, and then I had to leave there to go to Winnipeg," he said. "To get to the next level, I always had to leave so many people that I liked or loved behind me, and that's a tough thing."

SPORTS SHORTS

Pandas Soccer

The Pandas soccer program will be represented at this year's FISU Universiade Games, thanks to defender Natalie Swain, who was selected to the Canadian team.

Swain, who just finished her fifth year, was a 2006/07 season CIS All-Canadian.

There are both winter and summer

Universiade Games, which have been held every other year since 1959.

The 2007 Universiade will be held in Bangkok, Thailand from 8-18 August.

Pandas Volleyball

Edmonton volleyball fans were given reason to celebrate on 28 June, when the U of A was awarded the 2009/10 CIS women's volleyball National Championships.

Nationals brings together eight teams from around the country, including the four conference champions. As hosts, the Pandas will get an automatic berth in

the tournament. The U of A has hosted the national championships four times before: the 1994/95 season, and for three years from 1997 to 1999. They won each time.

Bears Basketball

Don Horwood, head coach of the Bears basketball team, has been given the Edmonton Salute to Excellence Award, and will be inducted into the city's Sports Hall of Fame for his contribution to the basketball in Edmonton.

Horwood is entering his 25th year as Bears head coach. He has led the U of A

to ten National Championship appearances and to the 1994, 1995, and 2002 CIS banners.

Track and Field

On top of her duties as U of A Track and Field head coach, Georgette Reed is an assistant coach with the Canadian Parapanamerican Games team. She will be travelling with them to Brazil in August.

The Parapanamerican Games is the counterpart to the Pan American Games, and is in its ninth year. This is the first time that it will be held im-

mediately after the larger event and in the same host city.

Canada will be sending 17 track and field athletes, including discus and shot-put thrower Kris Vriend of Edmonton, whom Reed coaches.

Reed is no stranger to international competition, either as an athlete or a coach. She competed for Canada in shot put and discus at the Commonwealth Games and the Games of La Francophonie. She has been on several Pan American Games teams and came in 17th in discus at the 1992 Barcelona Olympics. She also travelled to the 2004 Olympics in Athens as a coach.