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V-ball Pandas turning Japanese

ROBIN COLLUM
Sports Editor

It's Monday afternoon, and the U of A's Main Gym is full of young women, volleying and spiking back and forth to each other. Their shouts blend together with the background noise of balls bouncing and sneakers squeaking against the hardwood, but if you listen closely might notice something different about half the voices: they're speaking Japanese.

The athletes are members of the NIFS women's volleyball team from Japan, who are visiting the University this week. They have been training with the Pandas, and the two teams will have a full game on Wednesday night. Every year, the Pandas host a different Japanese university team, and in the past have visited to that country as well.

"Their sports system is similar to ours in that they go from junior high to high school to university to national teams or professional. They have a similar sort of calendar, and play at a very good level," said Pandas head coach Laurie Eisler, explaining the rationale behind the exchange program.

Both sides get a great deal out of the arrangement. The Pandas get to play

with what Eisler calls "some of the best university players in the world," and both teams have the chance to learn a different style of volleyball.

"For us, it's great competition and a good opportunity to play against some of the best university players in the world," Eisler said. "Their game is totally different. Because they're a little bit undersized—especially internationally—they have to rely more on speed and certainly skill. They're very good technically, and they use their speed and tactics to try to outdo our size and physicality. It's an interesting match up."

Eisler says that the Pandas program has already reaped benefits over the years from the exchange program, and have done their best to apply what they've learned to CIS competition.

"We've tried to take a page out of their books in terms of being better at ball control. I think in terms of the teams in Canada, we're the ones whose style is the most Japanese. We have bigger athletes to do it with, but not necessarily the time to promote the skills to the same extent that they have."

The Japanese team hasn't just been playing volleyball during their Edmonton visit, however. They've been visiting museums and galleries,



MIKE OTTO

KONNICHI WA That's Japanese for 'eight,' in case you were wondering.

and are excited to go shopping at West Edmonton Mall on Wednesday.

"A lot of them have never been outside of Japan, so culturally it's huge. It's a really neat opportunity for them to travel and get a taste of what it's like outside of Asia," Eisler said. "They're billeted too, so a lot of their memories will come from the time they've spent with their families in the evenings."

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Soccer Panda juggles busy schedule

ROBIN COLLUM
Sports Editor

Since childhood, Keshia Wallin has been juggling French-language schooling and an English-speaking home life, but when she gets on the soccer pitch, there's no need for translation. The second-year athlete, studying at Campus St Jean, is one of Alberta's key assets, and has a distinguished resume already: the talented outside-back as a named a second-team Canada West all-star in 2006.

"I had a really great year," Wallin says of her first season. "I was on the starting eleven—which is pretty big for a rookie—and I got that Canada West nod, which was awesome."

Pandas head coach Liz Jepsen has seen Wallin develop, and is impressed with the results of her progress.

"She's a very, very athletic player, and a great defender," Jepsen says. "She's one of our best young players."

In addition to her work with the Pandas, Wallin has been a member of Edmonton's Victoria soccer club women's Alberta major league team since 2002. In fact, they—and she—are in the middle of training for club-team nationals in October.

All this has left her more than a little exhausted, and when combined with her Pandas duties and schoolwork, Wallin's schedule is packed.

"As for spare time, I really don't have any," she says. "My club team is in double training, so I don't have any extra time. Any extra time I do have I just spend studying."

As for school, Wallin is working on getting all her pre-requisites for a switch into business next year. She loves learning in French, though, so she's hoping to make it a bilingual business degree. She has been in French immersion since kindergarten and is glad to be able to continue that at University.

"It's a really great community," Wallin says of Campus St Jean. "It's



KATE WADE

BONJOUR Pandas soccer star Keshia Wallin can play soccer in French, too.

really small, and the teachers are very personal."

The French track isn't without its hurdles, however.

"I'm Anglophone—my parents don't speak French—so it's a bit of a challenge," she says. "For the first couple of months, I pretty much didn't say anything in class: I just listened to everyone else. But now it's great. I'm much more comfortable in school and in general."

"If I had any time, though, I'd love to just be sitting on the couch," she says. "Honestly, I'd love to just be sitting and doing nothing."

A little sitting might be good for her health, actually, but she's not ready to slow down at all. This

summer, Wallin has been plagued with injuries, which means she can't perform at her best on the field.

"I tore my hamstring playing against the national training centre, and then I pulled my quad about three weeks ago," Wallin explains. "It's pretty unfortunate right now, especially since I'm heading to nationals in about four weeks, so I'm hoping to rest for these four weeks, but I doubt that'll happen."

Jepsen can't wait until Wallin's healthy again, but wants to wait until she's fully recovered.

"Right now she's playing at about 80 per cent for us, which is really too bad. Hopefully she's healthy at some point in time."