



Local coach to live Olympic dream

By Brent Glasgow

Young athletes across the United States dream about competing in the Olympics, but few could imagine that their long-shot aspirations would come true when they're 33 and sporting the uniform of a foreign country.

Cara Johnson-Hirsch of Indianapolis, founder of the local SoftballOne training school for young players, will live her dream after being named hitting coach for the Chinese Taipei Olympic softball team.

"It is quite an honor and I just keep thinking about being a part of the Olympics — somehow, someday," Johnson-Hirsch said. "It's an opportunity that very few coaches get in a lifetime, and it's almost unreal to me."

A business partner of Johnson-Hirsch's who has also helped the Chinese Taipei team asked her if she'd be interested in the job, and after refining her resume, she submitted it and waited about a month before the final acceptance came via e-mail.

"I was like, 'Are you serious?'" Johnson-Hirsch said. "I couldn't believe it."

Johnson-Hirsch will leave next week for a month-long stay in Taiwan to work with her new team. While she will have the benefit of using a translator when needed, she has also put in a lot of time since getting the job to learn Mandarin Chinese.

"They probably know English a lot better than I know Chinese, but I'm still trying, because communication is a huge part of coaching,"

Johnson-Hirsch said. "I have a friend that knows Mandarin Chinese, so she's helping quite a bit. I have CDs where I can learn in my car and I'm listening during my lessons at night, and it's kind of neat because the kids are trying to learn it with me."

On her upcoming trip, Johnson-Hirsch will work with her players in becoming better hitters of faster, movement pitching and will focus on the batters who need the most help. Though the setting will be a big change, she has plenty of experience in the field. A star at Western Illinois, she played professional softball for a year before collegiate and private coaching stints in Illinois and Florida.

Since starting SoftballOne in 2003, she has helped local players — including Avon ace Jenny Esparza, who recently verbally committed to Butler University — maximize their on-diamond potential.

Still, Johnson-Hirsch said her journey this month and the Summer Olympics in Beijing, China, will be as much of a learning experience for her as for her players.

"I hope to learn a lot," she said. "This Taiwan team is not like the U.S. Olympic team that's won a gold medal, but they've beaten Japan, China, Australia, and beat out New Zealand to place in the Olympics. These athletes are going to be some of the best in the world, and when you're working with great athletes, they push you as well. I want to bring some of the things I learn back to the athletes here, and maybe be a bridge between nations."

Taiwan has a unique and turbulent history. Invaded by Japan in 1874, the island was controlled by the Japanese until their 1945 defeat in World War II. After Republic of China (ROC) troops accepted the Japanese surrender, violence between Chinese troops and Taiwanese loyal to Japan broke out. When Communists seized power in China following its civil war, Taiwan became home of the ROC government and 1.3 million refugees. Under one-party rule until 1987, democracy finally took hold, and Taiwan saw its first presidential popular vote in 1996.

There remains a split between those who want Taiwan to be its own country, those in favor of full Chinese reunification, and those who prefer the current status quo in which China considers Taiwan part of its territory but essentially allows it to operate autonomously. That battle could come to a head shortly after Johnson-Hirsch's approaching trip with the March 22 presidential election.

"It will definitely be an interesting time," she said. "It is a very heated debate and so much will be at stake. It will be amazing to be around the process."

While the political war rages, Johnson-Hirsch admittedly wonders what impact it will have when and if her team meets the Chinese on the field.

"I would assume it's a very heated rivalry," she said.

Meanwhile, another fight remains. Pulled from the 2012 Olympics along with baseball, the future of Olympic softball is in doubt. Johnson-Hirsch is hopeful that the decision will be overturned.

"If there's an international interest to play, I don't know how we could be denied," she said. "If there's an affordable solution, if we can show how this game can have an impact on youth — not only in the United States but around the world, hopefully we can keep that international interest alive."

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