

The DEEP end of the world

Water polo coach enjoys international trip

Like many CFISD teachers and students, Cypress Creek assistant water polo coach Valerie Martin spent her summer vacation near a pool—only hers was almost 6,000 miles away.



Valerie Martin

In July, Martin and 32 CFISD students represented the Cy-Fair Water Polo Club (CFWPC) in Hungary as they competed against international opponents and took some time to see the sights. Former Cypress Creek and current CFWPC head coach Eric Sharar and former CFWPC athlete Sarah Larsen also led the team to eastern Europe.

Martin is a former Olympic athlete who helped the U.S. women's water polo team take third place in exhibition play at the 1984 Games in Los Angeles (the sport wasn't officially adopted by the Olympics until 2000). A veteran of international competition, she said she enjoyed being on the sidelines as the boys and girls teams battled tough Hungarian and South African opponents.

"It was fantastic," Martin said. "The fact we were there coaching with the top elite coaches of the world was quite an experience. You can't ask for anything more than that."

Sharar coordinated the trip through his former water polo teammate at the University of the Pacific, two-time Olympic gold medalist Brad Schumacher. Schumacher relayed Sharar to Mickey Gerendas, a member of the Hungarian National Team in the 1950s who defected to the United States during the Soviet Occupation. Gerendas returns to Hungary each summer to coach visiting teams from the U.S., and welcomed the Cy-Fair athletes during their visit.

"We were lucky enough to have that connection with Brad Schumacher to be able to go over there," Martin said.

The CFWPC players, hailing from Cypress Creek and Langham Creek high schools, spent five days in Hungary's capital, Budapest, and another four days in the northern city of Eger.

Their emphasis was work before play, as the teams followed a regimented schedule: an hour of early-morning training, followed by an hour-long scrimmage for both the boys and girls teams, then another set of scrimmages in the afternoon.

The CFWPC players were forced to elevate their level of competition in both cities upon facing the top Hungarian boys and girls age group teams.

"They didn't know what to do those first couple days, but by the end we gave them a pretty good run for their money," Martin said. "Obviously they beat us, but by the end we kind of figured out what to do and our kids grew exponentially by the end of the training trip. It's going to help everybody who went there."

Martin also said the players grew close and developed bonds with their Hungarian hosts.

"The kids loved it," she said. "They traded shirts and wanted to keep in touch afterwards. In both Budapest and Eger, we had Budapest kids come in on their own time to work out with us. They enjoyed it thoroughly."

The CFWPC's positive experience will likely lead to future trips, said Martin. The team is looking to make a two-week trip back to Budapest next summer to compete in

tournaments, and is also considering visits to Greece, Italy and Jamaica.

In the meantime, the team will resume training at the FLEET Swim Club at Spring Cypress and Grant roads. Like Martin, the CFWPC coaches and players will likely be anticipating their next summer trip to the far-away pool.

"It was rewarding for everybody, and nobody wanted to leave," she said. "The kids had a blast; I had a blast. You couldn't have asked for anything better. Everybody came back as a big happy family."



Valerie Martin and Cy-Fair Water Polo Club head coach Eric Sharar observe with Sharar's son, Jake, as the CFWPC players take on a Hungarian team in a scrimmage.