

Memorial volleyball group have rewarding experience in Labrador

Coastal Labrador is off the beaten path for most people in Newfoundland and Labrador, and this includes varsity athletes at Memorial University. So when representatives from the Memorial men's and women's volleyball programs were presented with the opportunity to visit the region they were prepared to totally immerse themselves into the culture.

The six member delegation, including two head coaches, Mellissa Oates and Luke Harris, and four athletes, Megan Conroy, Sasha Wilkins, Paul Easton and Alex Barrett, embarked on a whirlwind trip from February 19th to 23rd, aiming to teach local young people about the sport, as well as communicate the importance of post-secondary education. The visit was the product of the collaboration of a number of stakeholders and was supported by the Aboriginal Sports Circle, the Nunatsiavut Government, the Labrador Institute, and a number of units within Memorial University including the Office of Student Recruitment, Career Development and Experiential Learning, and Memorial Athletics.



Memorial Volleyball athletes are greeted by the local welcoming committee in Makkovik. Back row (L-R) Alex Barrett, Paul Easton, Sasha Wilkins, and Megan Conroy.

The journey to the community of Makkovik, though not particularly far in actual distance, was an arduous one. With 25 passengers on board a Dash 8 plane, the group flew to Goose Bay via St. Anthony and Blanc Sablon. After a short stopover in Goose Bay the group boarded an even smaller plane for the trip to Makkovik, with stops in Nain, Natuashish, and Hopedale before they made it to their final destination on the coast of Labrador.

Makkovik is a community of 380 people that has a rich combination of Inuit and Settler traditions. The Inuit people, who with their ancestors have occupied the region for thousands of years, have a cultural heritage intertwined with the land and sea. The main industry is fishing, with snow crab being the main species.

Upon arrival at the airport in Makkovik the group travelled via ski-doo to their lodgings. Travelling by snowmobile across the pristine landscape was definitely a new experience for some. Megan Conroy, a fourth year women's volleyball player from St. John's, remembers the scenery from the plane and then on the ski-doo, "With endless, untouched land the scenery was absolutely breathtaking. We all had a feeling of anticipation, enthusiasm and excitement about the experiences we would have over the next couple of days."

After a quiet first night of settling into their accommodations the group made their way to J.C. Erhardt Memorial School, the only school in the community, home to students from kindergarten to high school. The volleyball players would take part in a reading visit for students ranging from kindergarten to grade seven. It just so happened that, on this particular day, it was the one hundredth day of the school year, which is an annual celebration at the school. As part of the celebration students dress up like 100 year old people and, at the end of the day, take part in a ski doo ride where 100 snowmobiles parade through the community. With all the excitement of the visit, in addition to the celebration, the children were eager to listen to the message that the Sea~Hawks had to deliver. The student-athletes shared their experiences with reading, education and athletics while the children shared some stories on what life is like in Makkovik.

Later the athletes had the opportunity to participate in some events that are part of the Native Games. The chance to participate in activities that they have never seen before was fun for the athletes, if not a little daunting, as the local children clearly had the upper hand in competition. According to women's volleyball head coach Mellissa Oates it was a challenge, "We participated in leg wrestling, abdominal endurance activities, the one legged owl hop, arm wrestling and flexibility exercises. All of these activities challenged us both in endurance and strength as well as flexibility and agility."

After the school day it was clearly time for volleyball. The visit was, for many locals, the highest level of sport that they have been exposed to. On Friday night it was the Sea~Hawks versus the Wolverines, a group made up of selected athletes in the school. Men's volleyball player Paul Easton was impressed with the community's passion for volleyball, "The kids in Makkovik, and all across the Labrador coast, live and breathe the sport of volleyball."

Oates, through her time with the Newfoundland and Labrador Volleyball Association, knew that there was a high calibre of talent on the Labrador coast, "We looked forward to seeing the talent up here first hand. Myself and Luke (men's volleyball head coach Luke Harris) each ran three volleyball camps for the youth over the weekend. Sixteen girls took part in my sessions, and twenty-three boys took part in Luke's. Kids travelled from Natuashish and Nain to take part in the activities. Eight coaches took part in the three hour coaching clinic that we ran on Friday evening." Even when students were finished their participation in the camps they lingered around the gym to soak in the atmosphere.

The final full day in the community saw the group take part in cultural activities. The group participated in a performance by the school's drum dancing group. Several students also demonstrated throat singing, which was something the group had never seen before. Throughout the entire weekend Oates was awed by the continuing strength of the family as the fundamental building block of the culture. She said, "You often hear about how youth today are losing their connection to family and culture, this is definitely not the case in Makkovik. It was wonderful to see so many people take pride in their way of life and culture".



The group taking in the wide open landscape on snowmobile during a Labrador sunset

The experience for the student-athletes was life changing. Kim Kelly, the Experiential Learning Coordinator with Memorial's Department of Career Development and Experiential Learning, led the delegation in a reflection exercise upon their return. She commented, "It is certainly evident that this experience helped team members 'get the most out of Memorial' by fostering their learning in a practical learning setting in the community. It is my hope that this activity will be just the beginning of many opportunities for them to become civically engaged in the community long after they leave their studies at Memorial." The trip had the ancillary benefit of allowing the delegation to develop skills and abilities that will contribute to their employability and stand out from stack of résumés on potential employers desks.

The project was also a unique channel to increase the profile of Memorial in an isolated region of Labrador. The Office of Student Recruitment, who actively visit Labrador in an effort to communicate the advantages of pursuing a post secondary education at Memorial, provided the delegation with information on Memorial's programs and offerings for distribution to high school students in Makkovik.

Though the trip was brief it gave the community a chance to see athletes who have gone on to university, continuing to play volleyball at a very high level. It gave the young people a chance to meet the athletes and learn their stories. In an isolated community it gave young people motivation to keep working towards their goals on the volleyball court and in the classroom. With the motivation comes affirmation that they are on the right track to one day follow a similar path. However, as rewarding as the experience was for the community, it is clear that the Sea~Hawks were the ones who truly gained by giving back. The experiences that they gained over one weekend in Labrador will stay with them through their lives. As Oates summed up, "I can't adequately express how wonderful this trip was in words. We had an opportunity to meet local youth, community leaders, teachers, and all of these people were friendly and immediately accepted us and took us in as friends. We took part in so many activities over a five day period it is still hard to imagine that we did so much in such a short period of time. I would do it again in a heartbeat." Conroy echoed Oates' thoughts, "I had such an amazing time in Labrador, learning about a new culture and a part of my own province that I had admittedly had very little knowledge about prior to coming here. I definitely would love to come back again."