

Two of Missouri volleyball's newest faces have settled in far from home

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By Chelsea Roemer

Andrea Fuentes and Dariana Hollingsworth, who hail from Puerto Rico, have traveled far to embark on their college careers.



Photos courtesy of MU Athletics MU Athletics

Imagine traveling over 2,000 miles from home, adjusting to an unfamiliar environment and surrounding yourself with all new coaches and teammates. For two University of Missouri volleyball freshmen this fall, Columbia is serving as a new home away from home.

For Andrea Fuentes and Dariana Hollingsworth, it was a big step in their volleyball careers to leave their homes and families in Puerto Rico and make their way to MU to play for the Tigers.

“I miss my family a lot, but it's a good experience for growth,” Fuentes said.

For Fuentes, MU has become more than just a new place to stay; it is a stellar combination of academic and athletic resources that she could not pass up.

“I was looking for a good academic school, and I wanted to expand my horizons,” Fuentes said. “I knew that I could have the best of both worlds with the program and academics, and that there is no way to fail with all of the resources they offered.”

Fuentes selected Missouri over other big Division I programs including Notre Dame and Arkansas.

“After I visited Mizzou, I canceled the trips to all of the other schools; I knew it was where I wanted to be,” Fuentes said.

Hollingsworth followed her gut knowing MU had a strong program she wanted to be a part of.

“Mizzou was the only school that spoke to me, and it gave me a vibe that I really liked,” Hollingsworth said.

Like Fuentes, Hollingsworth chose Mizzou over other volleyball powerhouse schools in Nebraska, Iowa State and Kansas.

The girls achieved accolades back home before embarking on their journey of playing collegiate volleyball. One major accomplishment the two share is the experience of playing at the junior international level for the U20 Puerto Rican national team.

Fuentes had competed on the Puerto Rican national team for quite some time. She played with the U18 National Team as a setter from 2013 to 2015.

“I started playing for the national team when I was 15 until I turned 18,” Fuentes said. “It really shaped me and helped me grow as a player. It was awesome; I had my best experiences there, and it's not something you get the opportunity to do often.”

Later, competing for the U20 national team, she earned the role of captain and a bronze medal with the team in the AAU International Division.

“My coaches told me that I needed to be a leader,” Fuentes said. “The opportunity of being a captain came along and it was hard. I had to focus on it like a job. It really helped my game and me become less shy.”

On top of the bronze medal and captain selection, Fuentes was awarded “Best Setter” at the 2016 NORCECA Championship with the National Team. Her accomplishments caught the attention of Mizzou head volleyball coach Wayne Kreklow.

“The fact that she was named the captain of the U20 Puerto Rican National Volleyball Team at this past summer's NORCECA Tournament speaks volumes about her talent as a player and her leadership skills,” Kreklow said in a press release.

Hollingsworth played on the U20 National Team and was given the opportunity to play the team captain role for the NORCECA Pan-American Cup, where she helped her team reach fourth place.

“I was chosen because I was the oldest and I had the most experience,” Hollingsworth said. “Being a captain was new, not the same as being one for my high school. I had to step up.”

Previously, Hollingsworth competed with the U18 Puerto Rican National Team at the 2015 NORCECA championship, and at the NORCECA Championship in 2016 she was given “Best Scorer” honors.

“It was an honor to be there, but it was very strict and took a lot of discipline,” Hollingsworth said. “You have to make a lot of sacrifices.”

Her leadership role and success in Puerto Rico made her a valuable recruit for Missouri. “She possesses a rare combination of size, skill and athleticism that makes her one of the top players in the Class of 2017,” Kreklow said in a press release. “Her success at the international junior level with the Puerto Rican U20 team speaks to her level of play, and I'm confident that she will transition quickly to collegiate volleyball.”

The atmosphere of Columbia and a new volleyball program may have taken some getting used to for Fuentes and Hollingsworth, but the players and coaches have helped to make sure that they feel like they belong in the Tiger family.

“The other players are so supportive,” Fuentes said. “I remember practicing with them on a visit and thinking I did really bad because I kept messing up, but they were still really supportive of me.”

Returning players have made a big impact on the freshmen, giving them the opportunity to learn more each day by practicing alongside them. At the net, Hollingsworth is getting lots of help from veteran redshirt seniors Kira Larson and Melanie Crow.

“They're always trying to motivate the team,” Hollingsworth said. “They go hard, and that is how it should be. They are great inspirations.”

For running the offense, Fuentes looks up to the senior setters, Courtney Eckenrode and Ali Kreklow.

“Setting is hard, but they handle it like a boss, and lead by example,” Fuentes said. “I really admire Ali and the kind of teammate she is, because when she messes up she shakes it off and is really positive.”

Since the beginning of the summer, Fuentes and Hollingsworth have been with the team getting adjusted to their new lifestyle.

After the Tigers’ stellar 2016 season, the two arrived at MU excited to compete in black and gold jerseys. Now, they’re ready to be key contributors on a team that has a conference championship to defend.

“I’m looking forward to learning more about the sport and chasing an SEC title,” Hollingsworth said.

Edited by Eli Lederman | elederman@theman eater.com

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