

Mizzou Volleyball Insider: Puerto Rico / CoMo Connection

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Sports

By

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COLUMBIA, Mo. — For years, Mizzou Volleyball has made a statement as a competitive collegiate Division I program in the United States, most recently in its No. 6 ranking in the first AVCA Fall Coaches Poll. This talent reaches fans in all 50 states, and even catches the eyes of players, coaches and families on the island of Puerto Rico.

“I think I committed because I wanted a competitive program,” said redshirt junior and San Juan native Andrea Fuentes. “And there’s a really big volleyball community back home. It’s kind of a stereotypical thing. If you have a girl, you want her to play volleyball. It took up 90% of my childhood.”

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Alongside Fuentes, sophomore Leandra Mangual-Duran and senior Dariana Hollingsworth-Santana saw potential in Mizzou's program, all the way from their home island. But it wasn't easy to get where they are today.

"The odds of players back home like making it here to play aren't as great as a player from here, in the states," said Hollingsworth-Santana. "Coaches and families give you tough love every chance they get, just to bring out the best in you."

They explained how this tough love comes in all shapes and sizes, but the common theme and greatest difference between U.S. and Puerto Rican volleyball is simply the competitiveness. Summed up in a word, they all agreed that this volleyball culture could be described as "chaotic."

"It's a lot more technical here than it is over there, but we're still really good volleyball players," said Mangual-Duran. "When we go out on the court, a lot of people notice us and our presence just because of the fire we have, our emotions on the court, the way we compete and the way we carry ourselves."

Ultimately, differences in play and culture aside, these three all-stars are making the most of their growth in Mizzou's program.

"It's definitely a privilege to be Puerto Rican and come to the states and learn how to play, like you're learning two kinds of volleyball and you're executing them at the same time," said Hollingsworth-Santana.

And despite these challenges and benefits, getting to the states was still just half of the battle. Packing up and going to college roughly 2,000 miles away isn't easy for anyone, and naturally, the adjustment process took time.

"I've just kind of learned to love my family from a distance," said Mangual-Duran. "I let them know that the relationship hasn't necessarily changed, but I'm finding different ways to love them. And they have to find different ways to love me, because we don't see each other a lot."

On the other hand, they love sharing Columbia with their families when they get the chance. Hollingsworth-Santana will be the first to tell you how much her Father loves Booches in downtown Columbia, Missouri.

"I kid you not, he even talked to the owner one time," Hollingsworth-Santana recalled. "The owner even sent us all shirts."

In 2018, the Tigers got to travel to San Juan for their season-opening tournament. Over two years passed since their memorable trip to their homeland, Hollingsworth-Santana and Fuentes are able to reflect on the weekend spent with the team down in Puerto Rico.

“It was really cool to get to share that culture and experience we love with them,” Fuentes said. “I think that you can relate a little bit better after that. They understand where you came from, and they see a part of you that they don’t necessarily see when they play.”

Since that experience, the Tiger trio haven’t stopped working together to represent their heritage, on and off the court.

“It’s really easy to say, yeah, we’re representing Mizzou, but that’s not the case for a lot of us,” Mangual-Duran said. “At least for us three, we also represent Puerto Rico and what it means to us.”

The importance of family back home didn’t leave their hearts or minds when they were thinking about playing in the states either. Fuentes noted that what stood out to her the most during her recruiting process was when Mizzou recruiters came down to Puerto Rico to watch her, every single time that she played.

“Even after Dariana and I committed, they were still coming to watch us play,” Fuentes recalled.

The support that Fuentes felt from Mizzou wasn’t only unique to her. Hollingsworth-Santana also explained that when she saw Mizzou’s staff in the stands after she committed, she was reminded how much the volleyball program cared about her. She also explained how each time they stepped out onto the court here on the mainland, they get the unique opportunity to wear Puerto Rico on their sleeves.

They find joy in the little things, from hearing certain music to encouraging their team members to learn Spanish phrases.

“When we hear one Spanish song play in warmups, it kind of gives us something to play for,” said Mangual-Duran.

While Mizzou Athletics has grown immensely to better incorporate their student athletes’ cultures, these three women are pioneering the journey towards better representation and education within their program.

“I take every opportunity that I can to educate people on what Puerto Rico is and where it is located,” said Fuentes. “I think one of the biggest shocks moving to Missouri was the amount of people that didn’t know where Puerto Rico is or what it is, and that was ridiculous and unacceptable to me.”

At the end of the day, all three of these Puerto Rican athletes left a tight-knit volleyball community to play here in the states. Among making many sacrifices, they’ve seen and taken an opportunity to teach and help their new community understand just how important their culture is to them.

At any given moment, you could find them setting records on the court or explaining to someone that Puerto Rico does in fact have stoplights, McDonald's and Netflix. From their family back on their home island to their family here in Columbia, they are representing what matters most to them:

Love.

Not only for the game, but for each other.

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Players Mentioned

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