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Angel Collier, left, from Arkansas and Anita Biatciewska and Klara Knyz, both from Poland, conferring at the Scholar-Athlete Games, where teams are made up of players from different nations.

Dream Teams of Amity

Olympic Ideals Thrive at the World Scholar-Athlete Games

By JACK CAVANAUGH

KINGSTON, R.I., June 29 — On one court inside the Mackal Field House on the University of Rhode Island campus, Yohsuke Haga, a 5-foot-7-inch point guard from Japan, has just hit Hardit Singh of India with a nifty no-look pass for a basket and then been given a high-five by another teammate, Jonathan Bremer of Tanzania.

Meanwhile, in the adjacent Frank Keaney Gymnasium, the 4-foot-10-inch Ranawana Wedaralage of Sri Lanka, whose floor mates are from the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, New Zealand and the United States, is shining in a volleyball game against a sextet with players from three continents.

All of this is happening at the 11-day World Scholar-Athlete Games, which has attracted about 2,000 teen-agers from 144 countries and

all 50 states to the Rhode Island campus and to venues in Newport, R.I., for what is believed to be the largest international sports festival of the year.

In an era in which the Olympics have become dominated by nationalism, the medal count, the dominance of United States men's basketball "dream teams" and clashes over apparel contracts, the World Scholar-Athlete Games seem to reflect what Baron Pierre de Coubertin of France had in mind when he resurrected the Olympic Games in 1896 as a forum for sporting competition as a vehicle for international amity.

Win or lose, every competitor at these Games, which end Tuesday, receives a medal, and they do so while playing with, rather than against, scholar-athletes from other nations. Thus the polyglot makeup of the boys and girls basketball, volleyball and soccer

teams, along with the pairing of players from different countries in tennis doubles, swimming, track and field and sailing, to foster international friendship among the competitors, who range in age from 16-19.

"The competing in itself is important in these Games, and we've encouraged the kids to play to win," said Wally Halas, a former men's basketball coach at Clark and Columbia universities who is the Commissioner of the World Scholar-Athlete Games. "But building friendships, interacting, getting to understand each other's cultures — that's far more important."

Halas and another former college basketball coach, Dan Doyle, who conceived the idea of an international competition for bright young athletes, were amazed when 1,600 of them from 108 countries came to Rhode Island for the inaugural Games in 1993.

"I hit upon the idea while doing research on the history of the modern Olympics and realized how far we had strayed from the original intent of Baron de Coubertin," said Doyle, a former men's basketball coach at Trinity College in Hartford and the founder and executive director of the Institute for International Sport, based at the University of Rhode Island.

"I thought of how wonderful it would be to do what de Coubertin had set out to do — bring together bright young people from all over the world and let them get to know one another through friendly competition in sports and share their talents in the cultural events."

It seems to have worked on a grand scale. When they are not playing together, or participating in the Games' cultural components — art, choir, dancing, writing, poetry and theater — the teen-agers, some of whom speak little if any English, eat and socialize to-



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Ajou Deng of Sudan taking a rebound at the World Scholar-Athlete Games. Deng is committed to attend the University of Connecticut.

gether and assemble for discussions on a wide range of issues.

On specific "Theme Days," which have covered ethics and sportsmanship and substance abuse, among other issues, the teens also have heard speakers ranging from Madeline Blais, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author, to Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, the widow of Arthur Ashe, who is president of the Arthur Ashe Foundation for the Defeat of AIDS.

Funded in part by an \$800,000 Federal grant, along with contributions from a host of sponsors, the Scholar-Athlete Games have drawn competitors from Albania to Zimbabwe who all are housed in dormitories at Rhode Island. A close scrutiny of the competition indicates that winning, far from being the only thing, is secondary to the opportunity to play side by side with athletes from other countries and cultures.

"This is not like playing in a tournament," said 19-year-old Carlos Dominguez of the Dominican Republic, who in consecutive days found himself playing doubles tennis with players from Tanzania, Sri Lanka, Venezuela, Germany, Paraguay and Rhode Island. "I'm not here just to play tennis, but to meet other people from other cultures, and I have. If you lose, it's O.K., and no one walks off the court angry."

While there are some language barriers, they seem to be overcome on the playing field.

"On the soccer field, we communicate with the ball," said 18-year-old Aya Kojima of Malaysia, whose teammates have included players from Argentina, the United States, Sweden, Mexico and India. "And if you lose, so what? It doesn't matter because I make more friends here every day."

The talent level at the Games varies. Some of the competitors are bound for United States colleges on athletic scholarships, such as Ajou Deng, a 7-foot basketball player from the Sudan who is committed to the University of Connecticut. But Deng, like all of the basketball players, had to share playing time — 16 minutes apiece — with every other player on his multinational team.

This is an event in which everyone gets a shot at glory and, in the case of tennis, a chance to play at a shrine. Monday's tennis finals will be held at the famed Newport Casino and International Hall of Fame.

But all of the 126 tennis players will make the trip to Newport, and every one of them will get a chance to play on the Newport Casino's hallowed grass courts, even though they never got close to reaching the finals.



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Kwynn Sanders, right, of California hugging her teammate, Karin Maletzky of Namibia after winning a volleyball match at Kingston, R.I. Medals are awarded to all participants, not just the winners.