

SPORTS

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WORLD SCHOLAR-ATHLETE GAMES

Words of gratitude ring loud

Former athletes recall Games' impact

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SOUTH KINGSTOWN — The heartfelt notes of gratitude will start arriving later this summer, after the 2,000 young men and women who transformed the University of Rhode Island campus into an oasis of international understanding have returned home to each of the United States and to 151 countries.

The letters will come from world capitals and remote villages, from students who have every luxury known to adolescence and students who felt the lick of the ocean for the first time and students who couldn't believe the amount of food available.

Wally Halas, commissioner of the 2001 World Scholar-Athlete Games that end today at URI, calls them "changed-my-life" letters.

"We get a ton of them," he said.

But to hear words of eternal gratitude from a young man or woman forever influenced by these World Scholar-Athlete Games is even more powerful than reading a letter, however sincere the writer. And such tributes were there to be heard the last seven days as 70 alumni of the inaugural World Scholar-Athlete Games in 1993 and the second edition in 1997 returned to URI as volunteers for the third Games.

"These Games were the starting point of my life. They changed me completely. Words can't start to explain," said Diana Djokotoo, who arrived from Ghana in 1993 as a 17-year-old schoolgirl and returned from Oregon State University in 2001 as a 25-year-old graduate student.

"That's why I came back to volunteer. I wanted to tell these kids to take advantage of this opportunity. I knew that come Sunday it would be tough to say good-bye," she said.

Djokotoo grew up in Ghana's Northern Region in the village of Tamale, 700 kilometers (435 miles) from the nation's capital, Accra. So patriarchal is the culture of the region that she says she is from her father's village of Anyarko, about 70 kilometers from Accra, even though she never lived there.

"I come from a polygamous family. My father had three wives and 18 children. We lived in a compound. He was a farmer," she said.

A woman's place in northern Ghana was in the kitchen, but Djokotoo's mother was different. She went to a university and studied to become a midwife. Later, she pushed her daughter to be serious about school.

"She made me go into science. It was very difficult," Djokotoo said. "There were only three girls out of the 45 students in my class."

Djokotoo was smart and athletic, a runner and a tennis player. One day the headmistress of her school summoned Djokotoo and told her she wanted her to go to the World Scholar-Athlete Games in the United States. Djokotoo and her mother appealed to doctors and raised the necessary funds.

Djokotoo's arrival in New York was straight from a Hollywood script.

"When I came to America, all I knew was to be safe, pick a yellow taxi," she began. "At JFK I waited 30 minutes to be picked up, but no one came. I saw a yellow taxi and told him I wanted to go the Rhode Island."

He said, "Are you sure?" I said, "Yes." He said the charge would be \$120. I gave it to him. I had only \$200 so I gave him more than half my money. Then we kept driving and driving. He said if I was patient enough to come from Africa, I should be patient and he would get me to Rhode Island."

The yellow cab eventually found Rhode Island, and Djokotoo found the university.



JOURNAL PHOTO/KRIS C.

HAVING A BALL: Laura Leis of Pennsylvania reaches for a ball she and other scholar-athletes were volleying around on the University of Rhode Island campus last week.

"I was very lonely and homesick," she said.

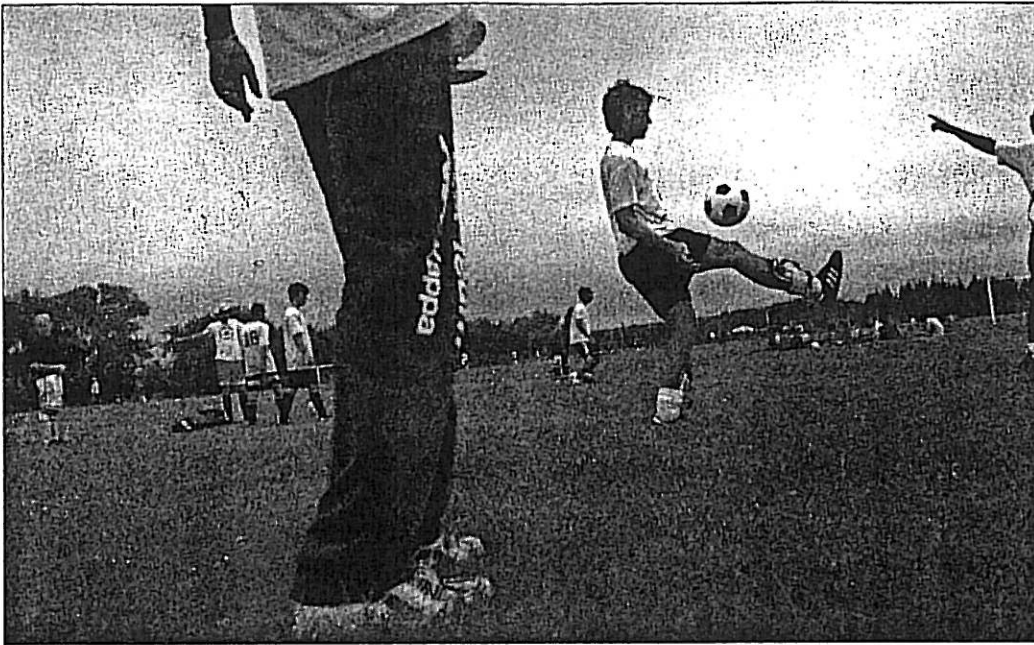
After the opening ceremonies, Djokotoo began to make friends and "to feel very warm." WSAG officials heard about her cab ride — there had been a bus at the airport — and reimbursed her the \$120. Her life really changed when the daily sessions started.

"Everybody gave me an opportunity to speak my mind," she said. "When I saw women driving and women leading groups, I said, 'Man, this is the

place I want to be! Back home, people said I would never get married because I wanted to be an engineer."

Ayamdoo Vitus attended the inaugural World Scholar-Athlete Games by a stroke of pure luck. So many colleges had signed up for the event's college fair that the fees provided enough money for a scholarship. Organizers wanted a choir member

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JOURNAL PHOTO / JOHN FREIDAH

PREGAME EXERCISE: Kevin Costante (bouncing the ball) warms up with his "World Seven" team at the World Scholar-Athlete Games at Kingston yesterday. Team members named their squad World Seven because it reflects seven different countries on their club.

Scholar

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"I was so excited. All they needed was for me to say I can come," he recalled in the shade of a tree in front of Keaney Gym.

The only problem was the nearest fax machine he could use to file his acceptance was 20 kilometers (12 miles) away from his Upper East Region village of Bongo, which is 900 kilometers (550 miles) from Accra.

"So, I had to make that great walk," he said smiling. And then walk home to a place where the only telephone is in the police station and the one villager with electricity would have the entire village over when soccer was on TV.

When Vitus arrived in Kingston, word spread quickly about the 19-year-old guy from Ghana who walked 20 kilometers to file his form.

"When I got here I wasn't lost. I felt love. I felt people cared about me," he said.

One of six children of a teacher and housewife, Vitus grew up in an average family. He didn't start studying seriously until secondary school.

"When I got here I was looking for interaction from people from the other side of the world," he said.

The World Scholar-Athlete Games sparked an interest in in-

ternational goodwill in Djokotoe and Vitus that burns to this day. When they returned home, they started groups to spread the Games' ideals. Djokotoe was chosen to represent Ghana at the Olympic Academy in Greece. She returned to the United States in 1995 on a track scholarship from Western Oregon University, transferred to Oregon State after two years and is two courses shy of a master's degree in chemical engineering.

Vitus attended a university in Ghana and hopes to pursue an advanced degree in English literature and education at an American university. He wants to teach.

Each jumped at the chance to return as a volunteer.

"After 1993, something was left in me," Vitus said. "I realized the world is beyond Ghana, beyond Africa. I said to myself, 'I must be here. I must be part of it.'"

So inspired was he that he arrived in New York in February and has been tutoring in the Bronx.

Djokotoe felt different when she set foot on campus. "I don't know if it's because I've been in the States going to school."

But last Sunday's opening ceremonies rekindled her enthusiasm.

"It was wonderful. It was electrifying. I told my husband that I will come back here every four years to volunteer," she said.

Yes, the girl who villagers believed would never marry because

she wanted to be an engineer not only married Kweku Wilson three years ago but also convinced him to be a WSAG volunteer.

Djokotoe plans to work in the United States for two years after she gets her master's and then return to Ghana.

"I want to contribute," she said. "So many people want to come to this country and cannot. I was fortunate."

Every change-of-life story is not as compelling as Diana Djokotoe and Ayamdoo Vitus, although Rommel Padonou's comes close. A Peace Corps volunteer in Gabon identified him as a WSAG candidate in 1997. He attended the games on a grant, met admissions people at the college fair and followed up with a few. In May, he graduated from Bates College in Maine, where he played basketball for four years. He starts work at Oppenheimer in New York City this week.

"From Gabon!" Halas marveled. "If that Peace Corps guy didn't identify Rommel, if we didn't have a development guy who gets a grant, if we didn't have a college fair ... who knows what Rommel would be doing in Gabon right now?"

Today, 2,000 members of the Class of 2001 will swell the WSAG alumni ranks. Talented young people like Jenna Iannelli of Cranston, whose introduction of Cherreka Montgomery, director of global outreach at the Feminist

Majority Foundation, led to an impromptu fundraising effort to combat the abuse of women in Afghanistan. These scholar-athletes, asked to contribute a quarter each to raise \$500 to educate an Afghani woman for six months, filled a trash barrel with dollar bills instead. The initial tally was \$1,200, which Dan Doyle, founder of the Institute for International Sport, pledged to match.

"Wouldn't it be remarkable if kids here become heads of state, and when they have to choose between war and peace, they choose peace?" Halas said.

But that's the big picture, two or three decades hence. What about now?

"I hope they'll go back and influence their neighborhood," Halas said. "That's where it starts, and it becomes a ripple effect."

Diana Djokotoe and Ayamdoo Vitus know what he's talking about. They did it.