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News and Features

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A Sunshine feel to Tampa qualies Kuk, Whitney find another place in main draw

By Walter Villa / Special to AVP.com

TAMPA, Fla. — The hometown girls came through.

Tara Kuk of Clearwater and Kim Whitney of Dunedin — the second-seeded team among qualifiers — beat Californians Angela Knopf and Catie Mintz, 21-17, 21-19, on Thursday to advance to Friday's main draw of the AVP Esurance Tampa Open.

"I felt a lot of pressure to advance," Kuk said. "Last week, we had a great weekend, and there was a lot of pressure for us to play on that same level. And to have everyone here wanting it just as much as you do, it's a little nerve-wracking."

Kuk said Thursday was the first time that her mother had seen her play on the AVP Tour. The same is also true for her in-laws, who flew down from Maryland as the AVP Tour made its first-ever stop in Tampa.

Four of Kuk's players — she is the head volleyball coach for Palm Harbor (Fla.) High School — were also in attendance.

Whitney, a junior-college coach at nearby Pasco Hernando, was represented by her parents and her and Kuk's trainers.

All those fans got the result they wanted. But when the day started, there were 27 women's teams competing for just 4 spots in the main draw. Of those 27, 11 were all-Florida teams and two more boasted one Floridian.

But when the Sarasota duo of Chara Harris and Brooke Langston — who finished a career-high 17th in the main draw last week in Louisville — lost in the round of 16, that left just Kuk and Whitney to hold the Florida banner.

And that was fine with the pair, who last week completed a career-best performance in Louisville. They finished ninth, the best result for any duo emerging from the qualifiers this season.

"That was so cool," said Whitney, who has played pro ball in Spain. "When we read that fact on [avp.com](#), we got really pumped."

Now, after a night to rest, they will open play on Friday against the 11th-seeded team of Angie Akers and Brooke Hanson. Ultimately, they would love to earn enough points in the AVP system that they can avoid qualifiers and advance directly to the main draw like other top players.

"There is a lot of pressure in qualifiers," Whitney said. "It's one loss and you are out."

No worries, though. In their first match Thursday, they beat fellow Floridians Capri Hilgendorf of Miami and Brandi Langston of Sarasota, 21-9, 21-16.

With the wins, Kuk, 29, and Whitney, 30, have now qualified for the main draw three out of five times this year and seven out of nine since they paired up late last year.

Kuk graduated from Sarasota Riverview High and Jacksonville University. Whitney went to Clearwater Central Catholic before leaving the state to play for Kansas State. But up until last year, they had been rivals.

"Whitney and I played against each other a lot in Florida," Kuk said. "Last year, she called me and asked if we could play together, and I said, 'Sure, I'll give it a shot.'"

Kuk said that the team clicked from the beginning.

"We finished 17th, and everyone in Florida said, 'Why the heck aren't you guys playing together (full-time)?' And we finally said, maybe we should do this more often and we made the switch (permanent)."

Kuk said she loves the support she gets in Florida.

"We're so lucky here," she said. "I don't know how it is in California, but all the girls here are so supportive of each other. I can't imagine that being the case in most states. I can't tell you how many girls from Florida told us they were on [www.avp.com](#) last weekend, watching us go."

Moving on up: Along with Kuk and Whitney, three other women's teams advanced to the main draw on Thursday. No. 4 Courtney Guerra and Chrissie Zartman defeated No.5 Krystal Jackson and Tiffany Rodriguez, 26-24, 21-16. No. 1 Janelle Ruen and Jennifer Snyder defeated No. 8 Whitney Pavlik, 23-21, 21-17. And in a mild upset, No. 6 Angie Hall and Beth Van Fleet took out No. 3 Er in Byrd and Paige Davis, 21-14, 21-14.



Chrissie Zartman and partner Courtney Guerra advanced to the main draw in Tampa on Thursday. (Max Bechere / Special to AVP.com)

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