

PHU coach at home near the sand, surf

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Sometime during the summer, don't be surprised to see Palm Harbor University volleyball coach Tara Burton-Kuk on top of the school's gymnasium poking a hole in the roof.

Make the gym an outdoor arena, add some sunshine, cover the floor in sand ... that's the way the coach would like it.

"If you would have asked me that four years ago, I would have never said that," she said during a practice session. "I thought the (outdoor) conditions would be unbearable, but the body adapts to it."

The Hurricanes varsity coach, who got married in May, is relatively new to the professional outdoor circuit, but recently competed in a national pro beach volleyball tournament in California. Burton-Kuk teamed with Kim Whitney, and they won all of their qualifying matches. The success led to a spot in the main draw and the Pinellas County duo went 1-2 for 17th place in the 89-team national field. Their losses were to teams seeded No. 6 and No. 12 in the tournament.

"It shows we can beat the girls in the main draw," Burton-Kuk said. "It gives Kim and I a drive to do well for future events."

Burton-Kuk grew up a basketball fan, but switched to indoor volleyball her freshman year of high school in Sarasota. She went on to play at Pasco Hernando Community College and the University of Jacksonville, earning several honors and awards.

Now Burton-Kuk has been playing beach volleyball the past four years and has another new favorite sport.

"I thought with two people, it would be too difficult, but I like it a lot better because I'm involved in every play," she said.

There are leagues in Florida for beach volleyball beginners, as well as world-wide professional tours for serious players. For someone with big dreams, beach volleyball also is an Olympic sport.

Burton-Kuk, 28, played most of her young beach volleyball career in the state, but last year began to travel to tournaments around the nation and has a regular partner, Chara Harris. Things have gone so well for the PHU coach, she currently is ranked No. 1 on the Florida amateur

circuit and recently received an automatic spot in the field of 32 teams for an Association for Volleyball Professionals stop this July in Atlanta.

Whitney, a Clearwater Central Catholic graduate, said she needed a partner for the California trip. She said there are about 10 local women currently playing beach volleyball, but when her regular partner wasn't available, she asked Burton-Kuk to go along instead.

"Tara's a really good partner," Whitney said. "We complement each other well. ... The team against us has a hard time deciphering who to serve to."

Now Burton-Kuk is eyeing a chance to play professionally regularly throughout the nation. The AVP has stops throughout the country, and with financial backing, competing on the tour could become a reality.

"It's a hobby, of course," Burton-Kuk said. "It's also a passion. You're driven to succeed. I'm glad I'm doing well on the Florida circuit."

Other local women dedicated to beach volleyball include Wendy Martin, Karen Hoyt, Carla Imperatore, Sherry Jackson, Lisa Holewinski, Susan Poole and Sheri Leverette. The Florida tournaments Burton-Kuk competes in also are available to men and juniors.

When the summer is over, Kuk will continue to compete but also will return to indoor volleyball and her varsity girls team. She said it's as much a thrill to coach young players as it is to play.

"It's awesome to be at Palm Harbor where the kids are already athletic," she said. "I can introduce them to a sport I love so much and see their skills develop."

There are few varsity boys volleyball teams in the state, but with a box of sand and a net, anything can happen. Burton-Kuk said she has helped many male students learn the outdoor game and confirms many are getting hooked.

"My students end up loving it as much as I do," she said.

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