

Lappe's CU Buffs hope to notch assist in Iraq

Colorado hopes to formulate partnership with AUIS hoops team

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When the American University of Iraq approached Dr. David Clough about coming to the Middle Eastern country to consult, the school was seeking his expertise in helping the school start up its own engineering department.

But Clough -- who is the faculty athletics representative at the University of Colorado, in addition to his duties as professor of chemical and biological engineering -- always tries to wear his "other hat" as well.

So when he came across the trailer for "Salaam Dunk," a documentary about the AUIS women's basketball team, Clough immediately saw the opportunity for CU athletes to make a connection.

"I just sort of threw the sparks on the floor, and we're just going to see where this goes," Clough told the Camera recently. "It might not go anywhere. But down the road who knows?"

CU women's basketball coach Linda Lappe, for one, is hoping the relationship between her Buffs and the AUIS Eagles is one that benefits players in both programs for years to come.

At Clough's urging, CU players Julie Seabrook and Meagan Malcolm-Peck got the ball rolling by making a video greeting that Clough took with him to Iraq in May and presented to the AUIS squad.

The two Buffs, who also saw the "Salaam Dunk" trailer, commended the Eagles on their passion for the game in a country where sports are not widely seen as a pastime for women.

"It will probably go places that we don't even see right now," said Lappe, who noted the chances for players' growth both basketball-wise and culturally. "But it's something that we're really enthusiastic about."

AUIS opened in 2007 in the northern Kurdish region of Iraq -- whose people suffered many abuses during former President Saddam Hussein's reign -- as a private, non-profit liberal arts school where all classes are taught in English and all races and religions are welcome. The Eagles players come from a variety of backgrounds and most had never played sports before setting foot on campus.

In addition to the greeting, Clough took with him a highlight video of CU's 2010-11 season to show the Eagles, along with the Buffs' film of their upset win over a ranked Iowa State squad. Clough said the AUIS players were genuinely touched that American players would take time to reach out.

"There was complete silence and there were a few tears," Clough said.

The AUIS players were also stunned by the athletic ability of the CU players, Clough and AUIS coach Pat Cline said. When Cline, an American teaching business at the school, asked one of the players if she liked the film, she responded, "I didn't just like it. It was amazing."

"It really had a great impact on our team," Cline said in a phone interview with the Camera. "Rather than it being overwhelming because it was so impressive, I think it was inspiring to them to work harder."

"Salaam Dunk," made by director David Fine, followed the team during its 2010 spring season. Its creators are still trying to gain widespread distribution for the film, which was shown at the Los Angeles Film Festival in June.

The film -- salaamdunkfilm.com -- documents a team that practices outdoors no matter whether it's 110 degrees or 40 because court time is hard to come by. The Eagles practice nearly year-round but play a short season with a handful of games in the spring against whatever teams they can find, be they high schools or other colleges.

Cline, who had been an assistant, took over the squad this year. He, too, hopes that CU and AUIS can keep developing a bond.

Cline, who is in the U.S. while on leave, is coming to Boulder in August to meet with Lappe, Clough and CU players to try and "put some structure" to their relationship.

The AUIS coach, whose team suffered a rash of injuries last season, has already been in contact with CU head athletic trainer Miguel Rueda about ideas for injury prevention and rehab regimens. And the hope from both sides is that the players can regularly correspond (Seabrook and Malcolm-Peck have already befriended the Eagles on Facebook).

There are also larger ideas that players can someday visit each others' courts and share their differing life and basketball experiences in person.

"I think the possibilities are endless," Lappe said.

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