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University of Lethbridge Pronghorns women's basketball team a welcome haven for Ukrainian nationals

Sport vernacular is often filled with references to war as commentators seek to elevate the action they're describing to engage viewers. Teams enter into "battle" with one another, home run hitters, golfers and three-point shooters "hit bombs" and the ebb and flow of games is often described as "attacking and defending." For University of Lethbridge Pronghorns basketball players Viktoriia Kovalevska and Vlada Hozalova, the terms and phrases ring hollow, because war is the reality from which they fled in Ukraine to continue to pursue their basketball dream.



"I was trapped in Berdyansk as, during the first week of the military conflict, Russian troops occupied the city," says Hozalova. "I couldn't leave my town because it was dangerous. Only a month later, I was able to leave the city after passing 20 Russian checkpoints."

Kovalevska and her family lived in Rivne, in northwestern Ukraine. She, along with her mother and brother, moved to Poland a week after the start of the war — her parents feared their city would be attacked by Russia from the north. As the situation worsened in Ukraine and throughout Europe, they looked to escape altogether and took advantage of the opportunity to come to Canada. From there, they were placed with a family in Calgary.

"It was extremely difficult, as you do not realize when you will be able to see each other again," says Kovalevska of leaving family and friends. "We are very worried and pray for their safety, and especially our two best friends who protect our territory in the ranks of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. One of them has been in Russian captivity for five months and we are waiting every day for him to contact us."

Dropped into a new country, living with a new family, learning the language and customs of Canadian society and thousands of miles from home, the friends had one constant to fall back on — basketball — and it served as the conduit to the next chapter of their lives. The pair of guards had been members of Ukraine’s U16, U18 and U20 national teams and teammates in the Ukraine Women’s Superleague, an eight-team professional circuit.

“They were getting out of Ukraine and basketball was going to be and has become the thing that’s helping them find their roots in this country,” says Pronghorns women’s basketball head coach Dave Waknuk, who was the first to express interest in the duo when it was clear they wanted to resume playing in their new country. “Basketball is a big part of their life, it’s their skill, it’s what they know and what they brought with them.”

Initial meetings took place over Skype and once the pair had settled in Canada, Waknuk was able to host them for workouts. He had spots to fill on his roster and adding players with a professional pedigree is always a bonus but for these two, it was more than a basketball decision.

“We were definitely interested from a basketball standpoint,” says Waknuk. USPORTS rules allow for three international players per roster, while professional experience is allowed for women’s programs. “The other side of it, you think about the positive impact their story can have upon our community and obviously the impact we can have with them and their lives. It just made sense and we said to ourselves, how can we not do it?”

Serendipitously, ULeithbridge had just approved a new Ukrainian Emergency Bursary designed to assist current and new students whose parents, because of war, were no longer able to support their sons and daughters. A total of 10, two-semester bursaries were approved, providing students with full tuition and housing. Four current and four new students were able to take advantage of the support, including Kovalevska and Hozalova.

“It’s something I felt deeply that we needed to do to support Ukrainian students,” says Paul Pan director of International. “For the university, it’s a good thing and it’s something we are able to do. We’ve got some really good students here and they’re all working hard at making a new life and it’s hard to even imagine what they are going through. This is what we can do to support them and help them along the way.”

Kovalevska (education/pedagogy) and Hozalova (physical education), who are 23 and 24-years-old respectively, have both earned master’s degrees from Berdyansk State Pedagogical University in Ukraine. Kovalevska is studying business at ULeithbridge and will play for the Pronghorns this season, while Hozalova must first complete the EAP (English for Academic Purposes) program before she is eligible.

Waknuk is thankful for all the support to make this happen. From the sponsor family to the local Ukrainian community and society to Pan's International office and ULethbridge senior administration, it's created opportunity for two players to play the game they love and begin to establish roots in their new country. He also marvels at how the game has allowed them to connect when sometimes language and cultural differences get in the way.

"It's neat because this gives you an idea of how universal sport is," he says. "When we first started conversations, we had trouble talking about what day of the week it was or what the weather was like but the minute I started talking basketball, or we started to draw things up, we had that common language. Even now, with their teammates, the easiest way for them to bond is through the sport."

Both Pan and Waknuk remark on how thankful Kovalevska and Hozalova are for the opportunity they've been granted, as athletes and as students. They also note how fortunate the university community is to have them on campus.

"It's bigger than basketball. Basketball is obviously the centre of it for them, but there's so much more to it," says Waknuk. "I'm excited for them and I'm excited for my team because it's such a great message of caring and compassion."

To view online: <https://www.ulethbridge.ca/unews/article/pronghorns-women%E2%80%99s-basketball-team-welcome-haven-ukrainian-nationals>

Attached photo: Viktoriia Kovalevska (left) and Vlada Hozalova

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