

# International Waters

Ashley Zeldin | March 29, 2007

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**Los Angeles, CA (CSTV U-WIRE)** -- In the water, Veronika Bartunkova (pronounced "bar-TUNE-cove-ah") and Alexandra Kiss (think "quiche") look just like every other member of the No. 3 USC women's water polo team. However, Bartunkova and Kiss have the distinction of being the only international Women of Troy on a team of 32 - 29 are from California, and one is from Hawaii.

"It was hard to get used to," Kiss said of adjusting to life in Los Angeles since arriving in January. "Of course, Hungary is a very small country."

Her hometown of Budakalasz, about 12 miles north of the capital city, Budapest, is even smaller, with a population of 10,000.

As a junior, Bartunkova, an international relations major from Strakonice, Czech Republic, has been around longer.

Bartunkova and Kiss did not have the benefit of playing high school water polo, with its visibility to college coaches.

"The system in Europe is very different," Bartunkova said. "Here, there are high school teams. In Europe, there are clubs, and there are no age groups. I would play with girls way older or younger than me."

Kiss' club team, Domino BHSE Polo, is actually the reason she came to USC.

"(USC's all-time leading scorer) Aniko Pelle and Sandra (Kiss) are friends, so that's how she found out about USC," USC coach Jovan Vavic said.

In fact, Pelle helped Kiss solicit Vavic, rather than the other way around.

"She e-mailed me and I called her back," Vavic said.

Vavic didn't know about Bartunkova to recruit her, either.

"I saw Veronika play in the Junior European Championship in Portugal three years ago," Vavic said. "I went to Portugal to watch those games, and that's how I found out about her. Then I contacted her coach."

Bartunkova didn't always play water polo, though.

"Everyone expected me to play water polo because my dad (Jaroslav) and brother (Ondra) played," Bartunkova said. "My dad used to be the national team coach - he played water polo his whole life - but he never forced me."

Bartunkova instead played handball for seven years, from the time she was 6 until she was 13. She explained handball, which to most Americans refers to the playground game, adding, "It's actually an Olympic sport." In fact, Olympic handball is a mix of soccer and basketball.

"Pinta played it too," Bartunkova said of USC assistant coach and former Trojan water polo player Marko Pintaric. "It's similar to water polo, but on the ground. It's more popular than water polo (in the Czech Republic). It's funny that no one knows it here."

She dabbled in water polo from the time she was 8, but only became serious when she turned 11.

"But handball was my priority," Bartunkova said.

But by her 14th birthday, Bartunkova realized she couldn't continue with both water polo and handball. Water polo won.

"Having her father as a coach definitely helped her skills and understanding of the game," Vavic said.

At about that time Kiss delved into water polo. She began swimming at age three, then took up volleyball and handball five years later in primary school.

"I tried every sport," Kiss said. Then, when she was 12, "my mother's friend asked, 'have you tried water polo?' I went to the first practice and I loved it. It's simple. I like the sport, I like the water."

European water polo culture differs from water polo in the United States.

"It's the national sport in Hungary, so when the national team plays, it's such a big thing, always on TV. I wish it was like that here," Bartunkova said.

Bartunkova has been on the Czech National Team for five years, having had the opportunity to play in the 2004 Olympics qualifier tournament in Italy, while Kiss has played with the Hungarian Under-18 and Under-16 national teams, taking second place at the European Championships in 2003 and 2005, and third in 2006.

Aside from the popularity and visibility, the American game is more physical than the European style.

"It's physically tough for them to adjust to," Vavic said.

Kiss is still adjusting to the heightened physical game.

"It was hard for me because I never played so much before," Kiss said. "We just had one-and-a-half hours in the water because in Hungary we don't have as many pools and there are not as many teams."

College water polo is just that - it requires its athletes to be students, too.

"It's always difficult to deal with classes and studying, and playing water polo," Vavic said. "And they're learning English, too."

When they came to USC, Bartunkova and Kiss were required to take English and math placement tests.

"Veronika's English was much better (than Kiss') when she came here, but she still had to take some English classes," Vavic said. "USC has an excellent system to help those players learn English and do better in their other classes."

Kiss takes two English classes, an information technology class and self-defense and dance classes.

"The first couple of weeks were very hard and I didn't understand anything, but now I understand more," Kiss said.

Friends and teammates have been invaluable, Kiss said. For instance, during the first week of school, "I didn't know which building (a class was in), so I asked Morghan (Medlock, a freshman guard on the USC women's basketball team and Kiss' roommate)," Kiss said. "If I have a question, about anything even little things, I can just ask her."

Then there's the issue of homesickness.

"I miss them very much," Kiss said of her parents, Janos and Erszebet, and brother, Norbert. "The first three weeks I couldn't call them because I didn't have a phone, I could just e-mail them, so it was hard to keep in touch." Since Kiss bought a cell phone they're in contact "more than before, but still not a lot."

Bartunkova knows the feeling.

"My first semester I wanted to go home. I didn't understand the system or the culture, but it improved so much," Bartunkova said. "I have so many friends here,

maybe even more than back home. It's my family here. I can't even imagine going home and never coming back."

And with all they've overcome, Bartunkova and Kiss have been the impact players Vavic hoped they would be.

Bartunkova, who scored 20 goals last year, has already racked up 16 goals in 12 games, leading USC with a hat trick against UC Davis earlier this season.

"Veronika is one of the hardest workers and is a disciplined player," Vavic said.

But Kiss has been a surprise. She broke out for a hat trick in her first game with the Women of Troy and bested herself with a four-goal outburst at Cal State Northridge, tallying 24 goals in 12 games.

"I didn't know that she was going to be scoring as many goals as she has," Vavic said. "She was one of the better players on the Hungarian junior national team, so I knew she was going to be making an impact, but you never know until they come here."

Vavic, from Yugoslavia, has been at the helm of the men's water polo program since 1995, taking over as head coach of the men's team after three years as an assistant, and founded the women's water polo program that same year. Since then he has guided the women's teams to NCAA championships in 1999 and 2004.

"A few years back, I wasn't really able to get the top American talent, but the last three, four years I've been really fortunate to get the best American players," Vavic said of why fewer international players are on his team. "But we are actually always looking for good foreign players. They're getting a great education, they have their education paid for, they're learning a new language, they're playing water polo. It's a great life. I don't think you can beat it."

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