

A Spanish Caravan

Melissa Bartlett's year-long journey of living and playing professional volleyball in Europe

Melissa Bartlett is a multi-national athlete all unto herself. A volleyball player, born and raised in Canada, achieved fame and honors in the United States, is now playing professionally in Spain.

Bartlett is a 2008 graduate of Hillsdale College, and spent her first post-college year playing for A.D. Algar Surmenor near the town of Cartagena, Spain. She helped lead her team to a very successful season, and as a result, could be playing at an upper-level professional league next year.

An All-American volleyball player for the Chargers, Bartlett has been on a whirlwind tour of the world over the past few years thanks to her skill in volleyball. But she's also made sure to enjoy the journey, and the exposure to such varied cultures is something she says she's grateful for.

Bartlett got used to traveling and volleyball at a young age, earning a spot on Canada's Junior Olympic team before graduating from Kent Secondary School near Chatham, Ontario. As a prep athlete, Bartlett drew the attention of Chargers head coach Chris Gravel, who heavily recruited her to come to Hillsdale. Bartlett eventually settled on Division I Eastern Michigan University, where she was a very productive player for the Eagles in 2004 and 2005.



Playing at Hillsdale

But after two seasons at EMU, Bartlett sought a new environment to continue her playing career. Remembering her attraction to Hillsdale's campus, academic offerings and the friendliness of the players and coaching staff, she signed to play for Hillsdale in the spring of 2006, ending a long and oftentimes difficult transfer process.

Upon arriving at Hillsdale, Bartlett achieved a new level of personal and team success. She led the 2006 team in kills with 411, leading the Chargers to a 29-2 record and a national ranking as high as third, new marks of excellence for the program. In 2007, Bartlett racked up 635 kills and was named Division II First-Team All-American.

Her coach at Hillsdale, Chris Gravel, said he knew right away Bartlett had the talent to play at the professional level.

"I have been fortunate enough to coach in Spain, France and Italy, and I knew she had the talent and experience to be successful," Gravel said. "Her playing style is one that I knew would translate well into the kind of volleyball they play overseas."



Having to fly out to a new country, learn to shop and live, as well as playing on a professional team where you are the only foreigner, is a steep set of challenges, to be sure. But Bartlett was able to take her training regimen from Hillsdale and help her adjust to her demands on the court in Spain.

“On the court in our matches, the level of play was very similar (to Hillsdale), and I can honestly say we trained A LOT harder at Hillsdale than the laid-back style I experienced in Spain,” she said. “Playing internationally and overseas opens your eyes up to just how lucky we are, how spoiled we are playing at our beautiful college.

“Also acquiring the international playing experience I did with Hillsdale when we took our trip to Brazil in 2006 is another thing that helped prepare me for this experience.”

That trip Bartlett referred to took place in May 2006, when she and her Charger teammates spent eight days on a trip to Brazil. While there, she not only played against world-class competition, but became immersed in a foreign culture, something she would experience a little more than two years later.

That trip helped bond that team together, and together, those Charger players would go on to new levels of success in 2006.

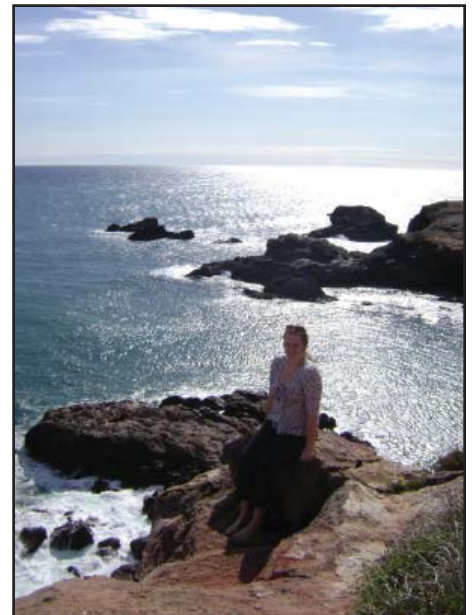
Fans didn't watch Bartlett play as much as they heard her. The pre-match warm-ups were must-see events during the two seasons Bartlett played for the Chargers. During the hitting drills, the ball would boom off of Bartlett's arm. You feel it in your chest if you stood too close to the court, as if her attacks were the subwoofer of a speaker system in a club. The echo of the hit would be followed by similar “booms” coming from the home crowd, as they simultaneously would marvel at Bartlett's power, while trying to intimidate the opposing team with what was in store for them that day or night. It must have worked, since Hillsdale didn't lose a home regular season match during Bartlett's two seasons with the Chargers. But Bartlett was never one to play to the crowd. Her playing style was deep, powerful and dotted with exclamation points. But she always stayed focused, celebrated with her teammates and never seemed totally caught up in her own ability.

Making the Leap Across the Pond

The summer after graduating, Bartlett became in touch with several professional teams in Europe, and decided to make the leap “across the pond” to continue her playing career.

“I had it set in my mind since the start of my senior year that playing after school was something I really wanted to get a chance to do,” Bartlett said. “But no official contact was made until around June 2008. I knew I wanted to play in Spain, so through a friend who previously played there, I was able to make contact with various teams in Spain. The team I signed with was the first one I was in contact with. I liked that area of the country and really wanted to play there.”

The first part of her Spanish odyssey was well, learning the Spanish language. Bartlett said she didn't take many Spanish classes through her schooling, but ended up becoming roommates with an American roommate named Katie, who had been living in the country since February 2008. With Katie's help, Bartlett was able to adapt to the language and culture.



Being in a new place can often be equated to a swirl that surrounds you. Everything you see, touch and feel is different and what was so easily seen before, now has to be looked for. But don't fret over the swirl that surrounds Melissa Bartlett. When it comes to finding her place in a foreign environment, she can slow the swirl down and focus as well as anyone. After all, this isn't the first time she's had to do it.

Bartlett has faced some tough competition on the volleyball court, but she's also had some challenging foes at home. Namely, cockroaches.

"They are huge and are all over the place over here!" she said. "So far, we've had five big ones in our house, and they had a bunch of babies. I took one on by myself one night and it took at least 10 minutes to kill. Those suckers are extremely fast and tough. They just refuse to die."

Bartlett spent a total of nearly 10 months in Europe, a trek that began with arriving in Holland to visit the family of her friend Kelly Verboom. From there, she made her way to places like German Autobahns, the Swiss Alps and the Grand Canals of Venice, Italy.

But those amounted to a series of day trips, something Bartlett is a pro at through all of her travels in her pre-professional volleyball career. Living and playing in Spain was a different deal. She was going to have to learn the language, learn how the drivers behave, learn how to pick the best stuff from local supermarkets.

Bartlett's knowledge of the language was limited before she moved to Spain. But she also had some time between moving into her three-story house, and having to go out and learn to interact at the everyday-encounter kind of level that nearly everyone takes for granted. She turned to a most unusual source to help her get acquainted with the language.

"The television we had has about 12 channels, nine of which are doubles. The shows are all in Spanish. The audio is all in Spanish, so I try to catch shows like The Simpsons or Buffy the Vampire Slayer and I either lip read, or put the subtitles on in Spanish, so I could learn the language that way," she said. "Everyone helps me if I say something wrong!"

One of Bartlett's roommates in Spain was another college volleyball player, Katie Steffens, who played at the University of New Hampshire. Having already played a season in Europe before linking up with Bartlett, Steffens understood some of the challenges Bartlett faced and had some sound advice for her fellow displaced North American.

"I think the best thing to have when you're looking to adjust and adapt to a different culture is an open, inquiring mind," Steffens said. "Melissa and I had a great experience in Spain because we were busy exploring different cities, trying new foods, experiencing different traditions like annual processions, or festivals. We weren't afraid of asking questions, which is so important when you want to learn more about the culture and the place you're living in."

The Season in Spain

The off-the-court adjustments Bartlett had to make were certainly more challenging than those she had to do on-the-court. A powerful player with excellent leaping ability, Bartlett slid into her team's starting middle hitter position with ease, becoming one of the team's highest point-producing players in her first season.

A.D. Algar Surmenor went 14-2 during the regular season in the Liga FEV league. She describes the competition as similar to what NCAA Division II offers here in the U.S. That record qualified the team for a higher level of playoffs, where it unfortunately lost five of the six matches it played, the last one resulting in a victory.



Epilogue: Back Home Again

Getting real good, real fast on the volleyball court has never been a problem for Bartlett. But for a 22-year-old girl, having a first job out of college in a country as exotic as Spain, playing a game she loves and is quite good at, was an experience of a lifetime. One that she already misses, even though she only returned to North America recently.

“I will miss the people of Spain a lot. They are overall so friendly and welcoming,” Bartlett said. “One of the most interesting buildings I’ve seen was La Sacrada Familia, a church designed by Antoni Gaudi. It is the most-visited construction site in the world, with eight of the proposed 18 towers completed.”

“She made us proud as a Hillsdale College volleyball player and she continues to make us proud with her success in Spain,” Gravel said.

As far as the future goes, it is leading right back to where she had her greatest success as a player, at Hillsdale College. She and Gravel have often discussed teaching and coaching in the future, and the first step in that direction will be with the Chargers in 2009, as a student assistant coach while she pursues her teaching certificate.

“We’ve had several discussions about the teaching and coaching profession,” Gravel said. “Watching her work with kids at our camps led me to believe that Melissa would make an excellent teacher and coach.”

Melissa Bartlett’s odyssey in Europe could be described as an extended vacation. But one of the best parts of a vacation is coming home, and by rejoining the Charger volleyball program in 2009, Bartlett will be home.

And hopefully, won’t have to worry about cockroaches invading that home.

