

For the love of the game: Local teens travel to Europe to play softball on America's Team

by Sherry Kelley

When Brooke Blader-Lucht, Wautoma, and Erica Pronschinske, Plainfield, went to the Jennie Finch Girls Softball Camp in Germantown in the summer of 2015, little did they know that they would be invited to play softball in Germany, the Czech Republic and Austria for a week in July of 2017.

Jenny Finch, a pitcher and former member of the U.S. Women's Softball Team who helped her team win a gold medal at the 2004 Summer Olympics and a silver medal at the 2008 Summer Olympics, hosts girls softball camps every year all over the country. At her camp Finch invites other Olympic medalists to attend and help coach the girls.

One of those she invited was Leah O'Brien-Amico, who is a three-time gold medal Olympic winner in U.S. Women's Softball (1996, 2000, 2004). O'Brien-Amico was not only coaching the girls, but was also looking for players who were able to play well and demonstrated good character.

While at the camp, both Brooke and Erica were approached by O'Brien-Amico and invited to be on Amer-



America's Team played two games in the Czech Republic, two games in Germany, and two games in Austria. At the end of the evening, the teams took photos and had a barbecue meal together, often exchanging small gifts. This photo is with their opponents in the Czech Republic.



Brooke Blader-Lucht and Erica Pronschinske posed for a photo with their coach and three-time Olympic gold medal winner Leah O'Brien-Amico during their trip to Europe.

ica's Team to play softball with 12 other girls she had selected at various camps across the country in 2015. She invited the girls two years ahead of the trip so all of them had enough time to earn money to finance their travel and lodging expenses.

Brooke and Erica said they sold t-shirts, rubber bracelets, and decorated bottles, got donations from family members and from some businesses.

In addition to air travel, bus travel within the countries, hotel accommodations, breakfast and dinner, \$50 a day was recommended for other miscellaneous expenses.

The trip was from July 10 to July 19 and started with a flight from Chicago to Munich, Germany. Brooke was accompanied by her mom, Robyn Blader, and younger sister, 12-year-old Bailey, who is also a competitive softball player, while Erica was accompanied by her grandma, Connie Hamilton.

After an 8 1/2-hour flight, the group arrived in Munich to find a bus and O'Brien-Amico waiting to es-

cort them to their hotel. None of the girls who made up America's Team had ever practiced together, but given their skills and character, O'Brien-Amico knew that they would play well together.

With little rest, America's Team, which consisted of two teams of 14 girls; a Red and a Blue team, played a German girls softball team and lost the game to their opponent. They found out after the game that nine of the girls on the German team were from the United States.

The Red and the Blue Teams each played two games in Germany, the Czech Republic and Austria, winning some and losing some.

"Softball and baseball are not really a very popular sport over there," said Connie. "They are much more into soccer and tennis."

The girls were a little surprised when they got to the ball diamonds, since "they aren't like ours," explained Robyn.

According to the girls, the bleachers were often old logs or worn out boards or sometimes rock ledges. "We really have nice facilities here," said Robyn.

The games were in the evening and were generally followed-up by a barbecue dinner. After the games, the girls on opposing teams exchanged small gifts like pins or buttons, T-shirts or rubber bracelets.

Some members of the teams they played spoke English so the girls could talk about the game, but many didn't, so they'd use the English-speaking team members as translators.

While the America's Team consisted of players from about age 15 to 19, their opponents had no age restriction. "One of the players on the Vienna M-Stars was 59 years old," said Erica.

O'Brien-Amico also scheduled time for sight-seeing during the trip. In Munich the group visited the Olympic Park, where the 1972 Summer Olympics were held. "That was my favorite," said Erica.

The group also had a guided tour at Dachau, a former concentration camp, which "was a very somber tour," said Robyn. They also had the opportunity to visit churches and castles, museums and other historic attractions.

The girls said they were surprised things weren't more expensive in the countries they traveled. Brooke, Erica and Bailey were delighted with the Birkenstock shoe store in the Czech Republic. "Birkenstocks were only \$30," said Brooke. "Here they're about \$100," added Robyn.

During their stop in Deggendorf, Germany, O'Brien-Amico planned a service project for the team members. Deggendorf was having a local festival, so O'Brien-Amico enlisted the girls to help with the half-marathon being held in conjunction with the festival.

It is important for O'Brien-Amico to instill values into her team members, including providing service and help to others.

After she had her America's Team established, O'Brien-Amico set up a Facebook group so all of the girls could begin to get to know each other prior to the trip. By the end of the trip, Erica and Brooke made life-long friends with their teammates and keep in touch with them through social media.

Both girls began playing t-ball at an early age, moving on to regular summer

leagues when they were old enough, Brooke in Wautoma, Erica in Plainfield.

By fourth grade, both girls joined a Travel Ball Club in Plover and continue to play softball all year; they also play league softball every Tuesday and Thursday nights during the summer.

In addition, the girls also play for their high school teams, Brooke at second-base and Erica as a pitcher. During the 2017 season, Erica was the Tri-County High School varsity pitcher as a freshman, and was named Central Wisconsin Conference-10 Player of the Year.

Brooke and Erica hope to continue their softball



Erica Pronschinske's grandma, Connie Hamilton, accompanied her on the trip to Europe where she played on America's Team.

careers in college. Prior to the trip, Brooke and Erica knew each other "just a little" through their games against each other, but became good friends during the trip.

"Leah (O'Brien-Amico) was such a good role model for the girls," said Robyn. "She would talk to the whole team about bullying, the importance of academics, having a positive attitude on and off the field, always working to get better and to be your best, and making good choices. She would pray with the girls and do daily devotionals. She has a heart of gold."

According to Robyn, the girls on America's Team were given an opportunity of a lifetime being coached by a three-time Olympic gold medalist, meeting life-long friends and having the chance to see three European countries.

"Leah is a very special person who uses her faith and success to encourage the girls she meets to be the best they can be both on and off the field," said Robyn.

"Leah welcomed the girls and opened her heart to them as she shared her life and how her faith has big played a large part in her success," Robyn added. "She encouraged the girls to be leaders, have a positive mindset in everything they do, respect others, be their best, work hard, make good choices and the importance of academics."



Brooke Blader-Lucht was accompanied by her mom, Robyn Blader, and her sister, Bailey, on the trip to Europe, and posed for a photo together in the backyard of a palace in Vienna.