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## **Best Years Of Their Lives? Problems in the District Cloud the Experiences Of Its High School Athletes**

**By Neil Abt**; Will Kuhns; Jon Solomon; Mitch Rubin; Bryan Tucker

For much of the past two years, problems concerning the D.C. Public School system have involved school administrators, lawyers, a parents group, a judge, the school board and fire code inspectors. Even though students were the ones most directly affected by actions taken, they rarely were consulted about the decisions.

This fall, student-athletes particularly felt the sting of the District's financial problems. Schools opened three weeks later than usual. Many football teams began preseason practice without helmets. Early in the season, most football teams continued the annual practice of traveling to play out-of-the-area opponents. The District teams usually were overmatched, but they had to be played for the considerable financial guarantees given the visiting teams. Most other District teams could not begin practice until late September and played abbreviated seasons.

These are the thoughts of several District athletes on how the financial crisis has affected them.

KYANA BRADLEY, T. Roosevelt by **NEIL ABT**

### Unsung Volleyball Team Rallies Against Challenges

Theodore Roosevelt junior Kyana Bradley said she knows she likely never will be in a tougher volleyball match than her first one of this season, which was played against Wilson in the third week of October.

"It was wild," Bradley said. "We walked into the gym and they had about 20 players to our six. It seemed after every point they were subbing. I thought to myself during the match, 'I wouldn't mind having a sub once in a while.'"

Bradley, an all-DCIAA basketball and softball player, wanted to play volleyball last season, but because of a lack of student interest the Northwest Washington school could not field a team. The delay of the start of school, until Sept. 22, particularly hurt the effort since it meant a delay in recruiting potential players and limiting the number of practices they could have together. 127Coach Diane Gardener's team consisted of six players -- the number on the court at one time. Because it took so long to find enough players and to file the necessary paperwork with the league office, Roosevelt had to forfeit its first scheduled game and then face Wilson before it could hold a single practice.

The forfeit "was very frustrating," Bradley said. "Even if we are going to lose a match, I still would want to play in it."

Bradley said she plays because it gives her a chance to get into better shape for basketball and to experience a new sport while having fun. At one point this season, the Rough Riders were 0-3, but they had had only two practices by then.

For Bradley, the disappointment of her volleyball experience is only part of the start of an unexpectedly difficult school year.

"There are a lot of new teachers and everyone is trying to make up for the lost time," Bradley said. "We have had to leave class early for matches, and some teachers get angry. They tell me I won't be able to catch up. I want them to put themselves in my position. Am I not supposed to play?"

Late in October, several students expressed interest in joining the volleyball team and were hopeful they could file their paperwork by the season eligibility deadline. Even though the team eventually numbered about 12 members, only one person on the team had any previous volleyball experience.

Last summer, sophomore 5-foot-3 hitter Karin Franco and her family moved to the District from Peru. Franco is talented, but because she speaks little English it has taken time for everyone to adjust on the court. But her presence has had a major impact on the fledging program.

"Sometimes we see her get frustrated with us, but she knows we are just starting," Bradley said. "She tries to teach us on the court. We all want to play harder with her on the team."

However, there are other limitations. The school's practice net is old and slumps down in the middle. In the early weeks of the season, there was no tape on the floor indicating the out-of-bounds lines -- only a dark mark where tape once was. During some practices, boys played basketball in a corner of the gym.

There is optimism. Bradley saw enough good things in a loss to Bell to call the match "a big accomplishment."

"Everything happens for a reason," Bradley said. "You can't get your blood pressure up over something you can't control. You can just ask the Lord, 'Why?' and know that in the end, something good will come out of it."