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Shooting star

Deafness doesn't stop 12-year-old from scoring big

By MATTHIAS GAFNI/Times-Herald staff writer
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Alexis Madayag can play basketball. She just can't hear when it bounces.

The Vallejo 12-year-old has become one of the best deaf basketball players in the country for her age. She was even selected for the Pan American Games for the Deaf Youth, held in Washington, D.C., in August.

Basketball has helped Alexis gain confidence.

"When you're deaf it's hard, a lot of people want to talk to you, but they can't communicate with you," Alexis said, signing through her mother, Jerina, who interpreted. "But when I'm playing basketball, it's not a problem."

After learning her daughter was deaf at age 2, Jerina Madayag, a single mother, learned sign language, along with her daughter. She received help and support from her extended family in Vallejo, who all have a passion for basketball - especially Alexis' uncle Jed. Her uncle, who runs a local AAU team (www.furyouknow.com), started teaching Alexis basketball when she was 7.

"I'm her father figure and I've always been involved in sports myself and I knew it was a good avenue to participate in if young people want to help themselves," Jed said. "It's definitely made her more confident."

Alexis has attended California School for the Deaf in Fremont for the past two years, after

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Alexis plays for her school team, which she has led to the Fremont Unified School District championship. It marked the first time the school for the deaf beat out all the other hearing-able public schools in that age group.

She also plays for the CA Ballaz AAU program out of Oakland, the only deaf player out of 48.

"I want to show people that I can play basketball with hearing people too," Alexis said.

Earlier this year, her school coach recommended her selection to the Pan Am team. The 12-year-old was the youngest player selected for Team USA and the only one from California.

Click photo to enlarge



Alexis Madayag, 12, goes in for a layup during practice at the Mare Island Sports Center in...

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Her team played in the tournament at Gallaudet University, the world's only all-hearing impaired college, against three other teams from Canada, Venezuela and Mexico - the Cuba and Argentina teams failed to show due to VISA problems. The youth event showcased basketball and track and field among deaf athletes.

"There were deaf people from different places and I was curious to learn signs from different countries," Alexis said.

The 5-foot-4-inch Alexis plays shooting guard or small forward for her AAU and Pan American teams, but moves to the power forward or center position at her school. For the Pan

Am team, she averaged about six points, six rebounds and five assists a game.

And Team USA won gold.

Her mother's fiancé, Issiah Epps, offers inspiration for Alexis. The 6-foot-10-inch Epps, who played collegiately for UNLV, has played for five years overseas, most recently in Turkey.

"She looks at me and tries to make my moves you give her time and she picks it up," Epps said. "That she looks up to me, it's an honor."

"For her at her age, and how fast she picks stuff up, you can only wonder what she can do," Epps said.

It hasn't always been easy for Alexis on and off the court.

Four years ago, Alexis' mother tried to sign up her daughter for a club team, but the league refused to allow her to play because of her hearing impairment.

Madayag, who for years carried around a photocopy of the American's with Disabilities Act, pulled it out and explained to officials that they play on public property and therefore can't ban Alexis from playing.

"My daughter just wanted to play basketball," Madayag said, who succeeded in getting Alexis on the team. "Now we don't have much of a problem because it's more common now."

On the court, with the hearing-able teams, Alexis must make do with her situation - including struggling with instructions from her coach.

"He thinks I can always read his lips and that's not true," Alexis laughs.

"A lot of times the refs don't even know that I'm deaf or girls on the other team," Alexis smiles. "One time a ref was yelling at me and I couldn't even hear him. I don't argue, I just

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ask the team what's wrong with the ref."

When she can, her mother also assists by sitting on the team bench and interpreting.

In most ways, Alexis is your typical pre-teen. She loves R&B and hip-hop music, hearing the bass beats on her iPod.

"I like to hang out with my friends, have fun, but my favorite thing to do is take care of my little cousins, especially the little babies," Alexis said.

Alexis is close friends and classmates with Hobart Kearns, the 13-year-old deaf boy who firefighters rescued from a second-story window as his house burned Oct. 13.

"I told him I'm so glad to hear he's alive," Alexis said.

Despite all of Alexis' basketball success, she has higher aspirations.

"I hope I can try and go to the WNBA. First, I want to play college basketball. I think I might want to go to UCLA or (Cal State Northridge) or Gallaudet," Alexis said.

Alexis has already been invited back to the next Pan American Games for the Deaf Youth in four years in Venezuela. She also will try out for the Deaf Olympics in 2009 in China.

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