

## **Sophomores from Georgia and Scarlett Middle School start first chapter of Huron Men's Volleyball club**

Shortly after school let out, sophomores Alexander D'Haene and Zubair Abshir would go to play volleyball for six to seven hours on a small squash court. It was in one of their neighborhood recreation centers, which didn't even have enough space to serve. But, it was in those enclosed walls, on those weekdays, where the two connected over their passion for the sport — which led them to become the co-founders of the Huron Men's Volleyball club.

For D'Haene, these sessions were his first times playing volleyball in Michigan. He moved from Georgia for the start of his sophomore year.

"I didn't get to participate in any clubs or sports. In Georgia, they actually have high school volleyball, so I kind of thought it was a given that 'Oh, this is a game I'm interested in. I might be able to pick it up and play here to meet new people.' And then to find out that they didn't have a team here I was like, 'Alright, well, let's see what we can do about that.'"

Previously D'Haene played soccer, basketball and ran in cross country, but chose to pursue volleyball in high school despite his minimal experience.

Unlike D'Haene, Abshir's sister needed to convince him to start playing volleyball. When Abshir joined the Scarlett Middle School boys' volleyball team, he instantly enjoyed the first practice. However, Abshir only played in one game, until COVID-19 ended his season.

"The first thing that was on my mind was volleyball and thinking that it's going to be canceled or it might get canceled," Abshir said. "My friends and I were with each other and we always complained about it. I was really frustrated. We did a lot of research and I emailed a bunch of teachers about it, but it was unfortunate."

Abshir was one of the first people D'Haene reached out to about forming the club.

"I was like this is perfect since last year I tried to email teachers about it," Abshir said. "It was a crazy coincidence since Alex hadn't played volleyball before."

Currently, the Michigan High School Athletic Association doesn't designate men's volleyball as an official sport. Therefore, even with all the emails — to the athletic director, Huron teachers and his old Scarlett contacts — Abshir and D'Haene received just as many rejections.

That was until they met Huron teacher, former U of M club volleyball player and Huron Women's Assistant Volleyball coach Veronica Choe.

"First of all, whoever's running it is doing it for free right now because it's not a club sport yet," Choe said. "It's still just a school activity. You have to fight for gym time. You're changing in the bathroom right before class. The coach has to wake up early and go to school for free, because they just want to do it. I'm in a position this year to be able to handle it."

At first, Choe thought D'Haene and Abshir were "upperclassmen the way they conducted themselves."

"I wouldn't do it if it wasn't for Zubair and Alex being so competent and so reliable," Choe said. "I'm there as a support to facilitate practice but whatever it becomes is going to be whatever they want it to become."

Choe created posters which attracted school interest. D'Haene and Abshir overcame the issue of gym time, by electing to hold practices in the morning (6:45 a.m.-7:45 a.m.) which — while a sacrifice — would result in committed members.

So, when Huron ninth grade dean Salvador Barrientes sent the news the club was approved, and they would have their first open gym, the group was ecstatic.

D'Haene and Abshir exchanged texts celebrating.

D'Haene: "Dude this is so exciting. We're in the home stretch."

Six hours later Choe sent the final confirmation email.

D'Haene: "YO IT'S GONNA WORK."

Abshir: "I KNOWWWW."

The night before the first open gym, D'Haene couldn't sleep.

"It was the most exciting feeling in the world, to see something that I worked on for this long finally come to fruition," D'Haene said. "It's not even that I reached the summit or reached my goal, it was that I got my foot in the door. From here, we're all looking forward to getting a lot better and getting to compete. So basically going from step zero to step one, it was the greatest feeling in the world."

On the first day, around 14 players showed up, and there has been a consistent cast since.

Additionally, to make the competitive transition, D'Haene and Abshir organized certain members of the team to play in an adult Ann Arbor Rec and Ed league, regardless of the fact some games are as late as around 10 p.m. They hope this will help realize their goal of being designated as a club sport and participating in the Michigan Boys Volleyball Conference's March league, to demonstrate significant interest to MHSAA.

"I would love to see the club be in the spring league for the high school teams, and I would love for all of those teams in that league to band together and say 'Hey MHSAA, you need to make this an actual sport,'" Choe said. "There's clearly an interest. There's clearly organization. There's clearly infrastructure already set up for us to do this. You got all these kids who are pushing for something. Let's make it happen."