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## Half Way Around the World but Still at Home

By Lou Fancher



Michaela Kopeck Photo Lou Fancher

Michaela Kopecka made a serious commute to get to school this year. It's over 5,000 miles from her front door to Miramonte High School, where she is enrolled as a junior. Kopecka, a tall 16-year old with a quick grin and a fierce serve on the tennis court, is this year's Orinda-Tabor Sister City Foundation foreign exchange student. Each year, the foundation invites one student from Tabor in the Czech Republic to live and attend high school in Orinda. The selection process is highly competitive, requiring an autobiographical essay, interviews and a review process involving panels in both cities. Host families provide room, board, and an open window into American culture.

Kopecka's host family is Bob and Maryett Thompson. They have had exchange students before, and jumped at the opportunity to do it again. "It's fun," says Maryette, "You get to meet people from other cultures." With three children of their own, having a teenager around is comfortably familiar. They are committed to giving her a real taste of California: traveling to Tahoe, Napa, San Francisco, Fenton's Creamery, and even the In-N-Out Burger just hours after she arrived. Kopecka returns the appreciation. "They do everything for me," she says, mentioning help with homework and traveling, but mostly, the daily interest they deliver.

When Kopecka made the Miramonte tennis team, her host family began attending her matches. "I've learned to enjoy tennis," Maryette says, sounding surprised, "and look at all these new friends I've made!"

Being far from home is made easier by the instant friendships of the tennis team. "It takes longer than five minutes to make friends," she says, referring to the breaks between classes and the short lunch times that could make establishing relationships in five months a challenge.

This year's tennis team is unusually close, according to head coach Mark LeHocky. He attributes it to the flexibility he's instituted: team members play doubles often and in numerous configurations,

reducing the possibility of hierarchy or star mentality. "These players have a level of determination I've never seen before," LeHocky says, "Michaela has that, and very good fundamentals."

From playing on clay at home, she's more of a baseline player, but is learning to adjust. "On clay you can slide. Here, on a hard surface, the jump of the ball is faster, higher, more intense," Kopecka observes. She started playing at age six and competes with a private club; there are no sports offered at her high school.

Kopecka thinks homework in both countries is similar, but here, she enjoys elective classes like sports medicine and cooking. She speaks Czech, German and English quite well, although the mental work of translating is exhausting. Tennis players often talk themselves through a match and when asked, Kopecka laughs, admitting, "I'm speaking to myself in Czech always. It's my mother language!" What surprises her most about the U.S. is the people. "In Europe, people think Americans are fat, or lazy, and they're definitely not," she says. "People are smiling, friendly-they're nicer and more beautiful than I expected."

Expanding the circle of understanding between different cultures is the purpose of the Sister City organization, according to Bobbie Landers, Orinda Foundation President. There may even be an added bonus for local athletic teams, according to Landers: "We've had several students and each time we had a student who played a varsity sport, the teams have won championships. They might be good luck charms."

Kopecka, good on the court, lucky to have landed with the Thompsons and charming, is living proof Landers is already correct.



Michaela Kopeck at practice Photo Doug Kohen

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