

Right at home

Japanese exchange student a hit at Delta Charter

By Justin Lafferty

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The learning curve for Asuka Takenouchi has been one of the nose-to-toes, 12-to-6 variety.

Takenouchi, a sophomore second baseman for Delta Charter High School's baseball team, has had to get used to a new country, a new language, a new school, a new sport and a new position.

She's an exchange student from Kagoshima, Japan, who is making strides at the top of the batting order for the Dragons. Takenouchi has played softball since second grade, but aside from pickup games with her big brothers, she hasn't really played hardball.

"Guys play baseball and (girls) play softball, but I want to play baseball," said Takenouchi, who spoke just a few words of English when she came to Tracy in August.

Her introduction to American baseball was a painful one. In the first game of the season against Cosumnes Oaks in Elk Grove — Delta Charter's first athletic contest — Takenouchi took a fastball to the hip. But since then, she's gotten payback on pitchers, leading the team with five walks.

"Her skill level is just amazing," said Dragons coach Steve Abercrombie, whose team is 0-4. "She's always hustling, she doesn't get down, she smiles a lot and, also, she has a good eye at the plate."

Abercrombie was a little surprised when Takenouchi tried out. But once he saw her play in the field and take a few swings, he knew that her game needed no translation. In softball, she played third base, but Abercrombie put her at second because of her ability to turn the double play.

She's one of three girls on the team, but there's a notable difference between Takenouchi, 16, and the others. Whereas her teammates might be prone to occasional chats in the dugout, Takenouchi is focused on the field.

"I've learned a lot from her," freshman second baseman Kayce Abercrombie said.

Baseball is one of Takenouchi's biggest passions. In Japan, the game has become a major pastime with millions of fans. She loves watching her brothers, who are now in college, play, as well as the Fukuoka SoftBank Hawks of Nippon Professional Baseball — Japan's major leagues.

So when area coordinator Michelle Anderson was looking for a host family for Takenouchi, she knew that Angela and David Palmer would be perfect. The Palmers love the outdoors and have two children, including one who plays Little League. David is also a huge baseball fan.

They've taken Takenouchi in as one of their own and said they'll be sad when she has to return home in June.

"I was really nervous because this was someone else's child that I had to be responsible for," Angela said. "She adapted really well. She was really willing to jump into our routine and try new things."

The Palmers aren't the only ones who say they'll miss Takenouchi.

"Playing with her has been a lot of fun, and I'm disappointed that she's not going to be around next year," Kayce Abercrombie said.

In exchange for learning about American customs like Christmas (her

new favorite holiday), Takenouchi has shared her Japanese culture with the Palmers. On March 3, she helped them celebrate Girls Day by decorating the house with dolls and cooking a special rice dish.

Angela and David also love coming to Takenouchi's baseball games, which attract a small gathering of fans. Delta Charter only has about 100 students, so baseball has fostered a feeling of school spirit.

Last week, as Takenouchi scored the first run against Venture School, she received a great ovation from the stands. Though many fans mispronounced her first name (don't pronounce the "u"), an ear-to-ear smile grew on her face as she heard the cheers.

"I'm excited, and I want to be a hero," she said.

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