



 INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE

 NAME

ASYA MILLER

 FROM

USA

 TO

RUSSIA

 DURATION

10 DAYS



0123456789



# USA–Russian Connections On and Off the Court

As a blind Paralympic athlete and coach, Asya Miller is no stranger to international travel. And yet her journey to Russia as part of the U.S. Embassy Moscow and U.S. Department of State’s SportsUnited exchange program would be different. For the first time, Asya and other U.S. athletes were traveling, not to compete, but to educate. Rather than bringing home the gold, their mission was to teach coaches and athletes, and to introduce goalball to both sighted and blind students in Moscow.

“The sport of goalball brings a lot of people together, and you can find people who have other things in common with you, whether it is an eye condition or being competitive.”

Although Russia has a national goalball team, most of the schools that Asya and the other participants visited were new to the sport and were excited to have a goalball demonstration and to participate in skill building activities. In goalball, players wear eyeshades to block out sight or light, so they must listen for the bells inside the ball that sound when in motion. Much like soccer, the idea is to score in the other team’s goal. The ball is thrown at a goal at the opposing team’s end of the court while the defenders dive to block the ball with their bodies.

“We were trying to teach the kids how to play without being able to speak their language. We just needed the interpreter in the very beginning to tell them to follow us, and then I learned the words for left and right. I’d dive on the floor and all the kids would dive in the same direction. It was fun.”

Local logistics and interpreters were arranged through a partnership between the United States Association of Blind Athletes and two Russian non-governmental organizations, Perspektiva and PH International. Getting to Russia was easy for Asya and others in the SportsUnited group who are used to traveling internationally. While some participants traveled with a cane, Asya just packs a monocular in case she needs to read a sign far away, and she uses a magnifier application on her phone that allows her to take a photo and enlarge it.

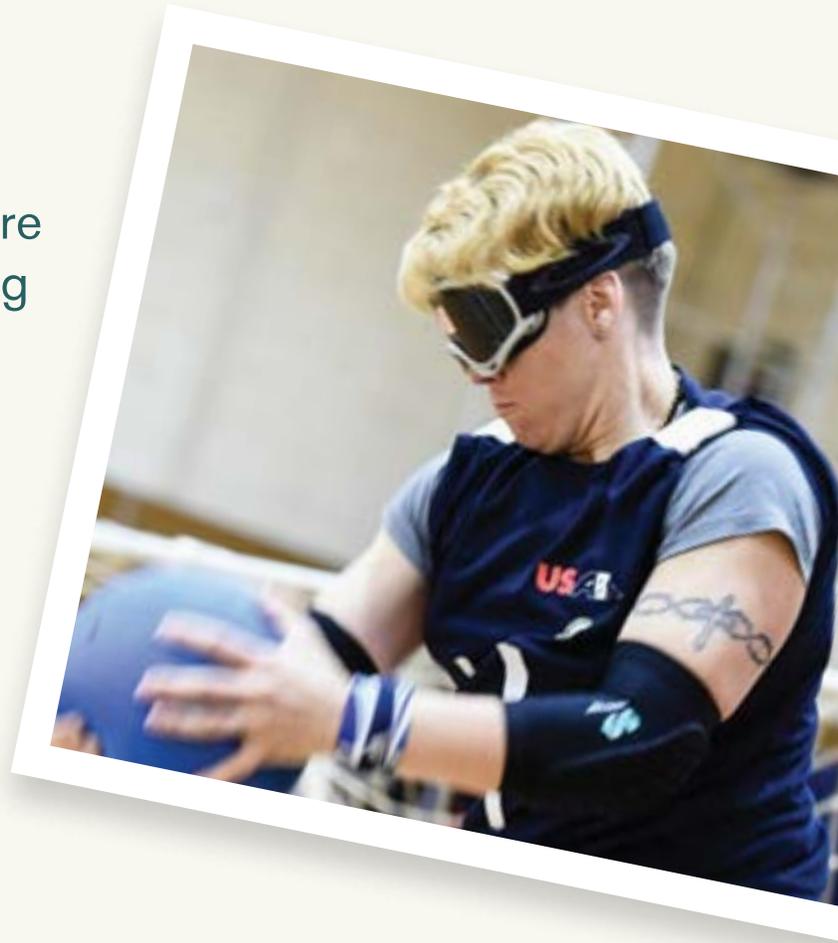




“If it’s an airport I rarely travel to and I don’t have a lot time to find my way around, I will ask for assistance. If I can look at maps ahead of time and know where our hotel is in relation to other things, I can picture how to get around. I’m going to use landmarks instead of signs, like counting city blocks or knowing which way is north. Some of the streets are busier than others and are landmarks too.”

When they arrived at each school, the group would often be invited for tea with the administrators, and when they left, they gave each school a goalball and eyeshades so the students could continue to play.

“It’s a rewarding experience because they appreciate you coming there and sharing what you know with them. People were happy and having fun. Everything about it was positive.”



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