



Former College student Lucy Boulton speaks about life as a professional beach volleyball player

Former Havering Sixth Form College student Lucy Boulton is a professional beach volleyball player and spends her life travelling around the globe to exotic resorts to play in tournaments as part of the British team.

Lucy, 24, attended College from 2002 to 2004. In just a few years her life has changed beyond her dreams. She now regularly visits countries from Australia and China to Thailand and the USA – and plays on one sun-drenched beach after another to compete against the best beach volleyball players in the world.

Lucy is living proof that if you follow your dreams and have the determination to achieve, you can be a success in your chosen path.

The ex-Abbs Cross School student took time out from her busy training and competition schedule to talk to us about how Havering Sixth Form College helped set her on course for her sporting life and what her hopes and ambitions are for the future.

Here is what she had to say...

Q: What was your time at Havering Sixth Form College like and how did the tutors help you on your path to success?

A: I left Abbs Cross School and followed in the footsteps of my older sister Charlotte Boulton by coming to Havering Sixth Form College. She was three academic years ahead of me and she went on to study Sport Science and Geography at Loughborough University. Charlotte is now a PE teacher at Joe Richardson School in Dagenham and she plays rugby for Saracens Ladies.

I took A levels in Physical Education, Law and Psychology, gaining two grade As and a C. I also studied Maths at AS Level and General Studies. I got on especially well with the PE tutors – Graham Hall, Barny Bury and Chris Patient. We had a great laugh at many a lunchtime practice and road trips to various sporting events.

I found that the College was a fantastic stepping stone between school and life after sixth form. The independence encouraged at College really helped me develop into a mature young adult ready to take on these challenges.

Q: What did you do when you left College?

A: After leaving sixth form, I took a gap year and started playing indoor volleyball semi-professionally in Sweden. I then spent the rest of the year travelling around Australia, New Zealand and America before embarking in October 2005 on a Sport and Exercise Science degree at the University of Exeter.

Q: How did you first get into the sport of beach volleyball?

A: I completed my first year at Exeter and then decided to defer my second year as I was asked to move to the US and switch to playing beach volleyball. Before this, while at university, I was playing indoor volleyball for England, where I gained 37 international caps.

Through a programme called TASS (Talented Athletes Support Scheme) I met my current beach volleyball partner, Denise Johns, and we were offered the opportunity to go and work with an American coach in Hermosa Beach, California. Denise is an American citizen but she has a British father and so qualifies for dual citizenship and therefore can compete for Great Britain.

So I made the big move 'Stateside' and prepared for the 2007 FIVB (International Volleyball Federation) World Tour. During our first season our pairing took some surprise results and I picked up nominations for 'Rookie of the Year' as well as having the 6th fastest serve that year.

Q: What tournaments have you played in since and what are your major achievements?

A: At the end of the 2007 season we relocated back to the UK to our 'Centre of Excellence for British Beach Volleyball' which is based at the university in Bath. This is where I currently live.

Since then I've played in two more full World Tour seasons (2008 and 2009). We narrowly missed out by eight places to qualify for the Beijing Olympics, but still got to go and watch the event as part of Britain's Olympic Ambition Programme for potential future Olympians. We did, however, play in our first World Championships in Stavanger, Norway, which was quite an experience playing against one of the best Brazilian players of all time in front of 8,000 spectators!

Our best finish to date was a 4th in the European Tour, September 2009, and we're also the current British Champions.

During this time I also picked up my studies again and am due to graduate in July of this year.

Q: What is next on your agenda?

A: We've just started preparations for the 2010 season and at present, while the UK is suffering rain and more rain, I'm warm-weather training in Tenerife. Once the British weather gets a bit better, we will move back and continue training outside in Bath. The tour kicks off in Brazil in mid-April and continues through to November, taking in 16 events, including six Grand Slams.

Of course, the Olympics are our main focus. Denise and I are hoping to keep improving our world ranking with our thoughts on Olympic qualification for London 2012. Although we automatically gain a host country spot, we're competing with our fellow GB pair and training partners, Zara Dampney and Shauna Mullin, so we're both hoping to qualify by our own right for the Games.

However, there is a lot of volleyball to play between now and then. The World Championships are in Rome next year so that will be another big target for us. We would like to start taking some top 10 finishes on the World Tour and becoming a regular main draw team.

Q: How different is your life now to when you were at Havering Sixth Form College?

A: It's very different from when I was at College and only travelling from Suttons Avenue, Hornchurch, where I lived, to college and back every day. I'm now on tour for approximately eight months of the year, taking in Continents one beach at a time! It's a fantastic lifestyle and I consider myself extremely lucky to be given the opportunities I have – traversing the globe, playing world-class sport as well as meeting some great people and sharing unforgettable experiences.

It is hard work though. I train full-time to continually better myself and there are only so many airports you can see before they all start to look the same! And trying to study in between takes dedication and lots of time-management. Even so, I would never change what I do as I think I have the best job in the world!

Q: What advice would you give to ambitious Havering Sixth Form College students?

A: The best advice I can give students at College today is to take whatever opportunities come your way. I never thought when I was 17 sat in A Level Law class that a few years down the line I'd be a professional beach volleyball player and potential future Olympian.

I would say, use your skills in whatever area they may be, and dream big!