

ETBU student-athletes share faith in Northern Ireland

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East Texas Baptist University women's basketball team played games with schoolchildren, taught young people how to dribble and shoot, assisted a prison ministry, competed against local teams and shared their faith on a recent trip to Northern Ireland.

The student-athletes and coaches partnered with the International Sports Federation and served alongside the Salt Factory Sports group in Belfast as part of ETBU's 16th Tiger Athletic Mission Experience.



ETBU student-athletes played games and led sports clinics for children and youth in Northern Ireland. (ETBU Photo)

At William Foote Memorial Primary School, the Tigers played castle ball, bucket ball and American football with the students. The ETBU team also conducted basketball clinics at Harmony Hill School and Holy Trinity School in Belfast, teaching students various skills and playing games.

“One kid said to me, ‘Once you find something you love, it becomes dangerous to stop learning,’” said Erin Berry, a senior psychology major at ETBU. “The more I have let those words sink in, the more meaningful they

have become.

“As Christians, we must obey [God’s] will for our lives by taking time to connect with him through truth and his word.”

Traveling to Lisburn, the Tigers faced the Phoenix Rockets. Following the game, the two squads joined together in fellowship.

ETBU students also had opportunities for sightseeing and learning more about Northern Ireland, visiting Belfast Castle, Cave Hill Country Park and the Ulster Museum. They also toured the monastery of Saint Mo-Choi of Nendrum, the Inch Abbey and the Cathedral of the Holy Trinity, where Saint Patrick is buried.

Joining in worship and ministry

At the cathedral, ETBU junior worship studies major Abigail Taylor played the piano and led the team in worship.

“Being able to worship together in this place was an indescribable experience,” Taylor said. “It was a humbling and precious time for me to be able to worship in such a beautiful cathedral on the other side of the world. The presence of the Holy Spirit was felt like never before.”

Splitting into small groups, the ETBU student-athletes spent one day participating in various sports camps and clinics at three schools.

“In the moments we got to spend with the kids each morning, we let the joy of Christ shine through us in everything we were doing,” said Michaela James, a senior elementary education major at ETBU.

The team led a Saturday morning basketball camp for children from throughout the community. The Tigers joined campers and their families for lunch, providing the student-athletes an opportunity to interact further

and share how Christ has impacted their lives.

Traveling to Dublin, the ETBU team faced the Ireland Women's Under 20 National Team and enjoyed spending time with the team in a luncheon following the game.

"Playing against some of Ireland's best players in our age division has been an incredible experience and is an opportunity I will never forget," said Tiffany Bickford, a freshman psychology major.



ETBU's women's basketball team worshipped at Lagan Valley Vineyard Church in Northern Ireland and helped clean and organize a new facility for the church's ministry to prisoners and their families. (ETBU Photo)

On Sunday, the team went to Lagan Valley Vineyard church to participate in morning worship, and they traveled to St. Anne's Cathedral for evening worship and prayer.

Between worship services, they ventured to Saint George's Market to enjoy the culture and explore food, clothing and jewelry vendors from Belfast.

The Tigers also partnered with Lagan Valley Vineyard Church to assist the church's prison ministry, which shares the love of Christ with inmates and their families in Northern Ireland. ETBU student-athletes and coaches visited with members of the ministry, and they helped clean and organize a new facility the organization will be moving into.

In the final game of the trip, the Tigers defeated the Dublin Lions. Mollie Dittmar, a senior ETBU mathematics education major, reflected on conversations among the teams post-game.

"It was so much fun talking with the girls and comparing the similarities and differences from our lifestyles," Dittmar said. "My prayer is that through our words and actions, the love of Christ was on full display.

"The Lord moved in my heart and the hearts of others throughout our team on this trip. This was an incredible experience, and I am so thankful for this opportunity."

The women's basketball team and staff expected lives in Northern Ireland to be shaped on the trip, but God also worked in the lives of the ETBU student-athletes.

"We began our trip thinking about the lives of people in Northern Ireland that would be changed but found quickly how this experience transformed us from the inside out," ETBU Women's Basketball Head Coach Blake Arbogast said.

"To watch our team serve and share the gospel in a country divided by hatred based on what street they live on, the school they attend, or even what side of a wall they live on, was very powerful.

“We are grateful for the work that our partner, Salt Factory Sports, does to further God’s kingdom through sports ministry in Northern Ireland. We are grateful to the individuals that worked tirelessly to make this trip possible through prayer and donations to allow our group to travel to one of the most beautiful places I have ever seen.”