

There's a new star in town

Kovac Veljko took a leap of faith when he moved to Hong Kong on a sports scholarship - but the basketball star has never looked back, writes **Kelly Ho**

With only seconds left on the clock, the City University basketball team were two points behind frequent intervarsity champions Polytechnic University.

It was a critical match: the winning team would earn a spot in the semi-finals of the AXA - USFHK Basketball Competition.

While PolyU seemed confident they could hold onto their narrow lead, the CityU players refused to admit defeat.

They made a swift pass to one of their finest shooters - Kovac Veljko, one of the few overseas players at the local university-level tournament.

The 21-year-old locked eyes on the hoop, extended his arms and flicked his wrist to make a three-pointer shot. The ball went in, and the clock buzzed immediately after.

The players, and their fans in the crowd, were over the moon. Veljko's buzzer beater had turned the game around, beating their biggest rivals to the next round with a score of 48-47.

The team kept up their winning streak all the way to the finals, where they succeeded in defeating Chu Hai College of Higher Education, and claimed the champion's title for the first time in six years.

Many credited the team's success to Veljko's star move, but the Serbia-born player was quick to correct them.

"I was really happy about the fact that my three-pointer came from a pass. It was not a personal move, but a team effort," insisted Veljko, speaking to *Young Post* after the match.

"Our bond wasn't as strong in the beginning - I remember we were thrashed in our first game. But we

gradually became closer as the season went on."

The computing mathematics student arrived at CityU on a four-year sports scholarship two years ago.

Having spent most of his life in



Born in Serbia and raised in Greece, Kovac Veljko (in green) is now studying at City University on a four-year sports scholarship. Photos: City University of Hong Kong

Greece, Veljko knew nothing about Hong Kong. But his family thought he would have more opportunities in Asia to pursue both a career and his love of basketball. So he took a chance.

"I didn't even know where Hong Kong was. I knew it was somewhere in China, but I had to Google to find its exact location," he admitted.

"I'm not from a rich family, so I needed a full scholarship to study at university. The offer from CityU was the best one I got."

But the scholarship also comes with stress, as Veljko constantly feels under pressure to prove to his coach and the sports department that he is worthy of the opportunity he's been given.

He also needs maintain a Grand Point Average (GPA) of no less than 2.5 to keep the scholarship. That may sound reasonable, but Veljko pointed out that 2.5 is a high bar for mathematics students to meet.

"I've chosen one of the most difficult majors and I must spend hours studying. It's quite demanding; I'm thankful I have the self-discipline from my years of basketball training to help me tackle my work," he said.

Like many overseas students,

Veljko understands very little Cantonese. Yet despite the language barrier, he has never felt like an outsider on his team. His teammates always invite him to lunch and dinner, and even act as translators when necessary.

"Sometimes during a time-out, the coach gives instructions in Cantonese, because there is so little time to talk. I always have a teammate beside me doing the translation," he said.

One reason I love the sport is because every year the team and the games are different

Back in secondary school, Veljko spent a year on exchange in the US. Getting to play basketball in different countries has allowed him to try out a mix of different styles of play.

He sees similarities between the Hong Kong and European style of play, which focuses on strategy and team skills, while games in the US are generally more physical. In the States, players are required to have impeccable personal skills,

such as dribbling, shooting and one-on-one tactics.

"One reason I love the sport is because every year the team and the games are different. This is especially true for me, because I've played in Europe, the US and Hong Kong. I think this makes basketball very interesting," said Veljko, who has been playing the sport for 15 years.

After a well-earned summer break spent with his family in Greece and Serbia, Veljko is ready to kick off his training again.

The team now have just one goal in mind: to repeat their success in the USFHK tournament and defend their title.

But Veljko has other things to think about too. As he nears graduation, the player is caught between two paths: pursue a professional career in sports, or follow his dream of becoming a mechanical engineer.

"In five year's time, I will be 26. I don't think I'll be able to handle a professional career and a basketball career at the same time," he said.

"I will make a decision by the end of university. I think I'll stay in Asia rather than return to Europe - Asia is a good place for young, ambitious people like me."

Veljko is unsure whether to pursue a career in basketball after university.