

PROTECT, SERVE AND VOLLEY

TIM WILKIN Staff writer

Times Union Section: SPORTS, Page: C1

Date: Tuesday, October 26, 2004

Loudonville She answers her calls in equipment that is foreign to most tennis players.

Helmet.

Boots.

Oxygen tank.

Denisa Hluchova is the No. 1 singles player for the Siena women's team. She's also a native of Slovakia and a volunteer firefighter for the Shaker Road-Loudonville Fire Department.

Two nights a week, Hluchova arrives at the firehouse at 6 p.m. and stays until 6 a.m., sometimes four hours later than that.

Her motivation?

She said she just enjoys helping people.

"My friends all tell me I'm crazy," said Hluchova, a junior who majors in international business. "They tell me I should be doing something else in my spare time."

Teammate Brook Fisher disagrees.

"We don't think she is crazy," Fisher said. "I think she really enjoys what she is doing and I am excited for her. It's kind of nice that she would want to do something to help out the community."

Hoping to pursue better opportunities in tennis, Hluchova came to the United States at age 16. While living with an aunt and uncle on Long Island, she played for two years at St. Francis Prep in Flushing before arriving at Siena three years ago.

During her time downstate, she saw the horror of Sept. 11, something she says changed her life forever.

"After that happened, I knew what I wanted to do with my life," Hluchova said. "I wanted to help people."

She started showing her face around New York City fire departments, hoping to get a foot in the door. Hluchova said she received some training there and

even went out on a few calls.

When she came to Siena, she wanted to remain a volunteer firefighter. She met Jerry Paris, the fire chief at Shaker Road-Loudonville.

"When she first came in, she told me she was very serious about this," said Paris, 42, who has been a firefighter since age 18. "We treat everyone here as an equal. It's up to them to prove they are capable of doing the job."

During her two years as a volunteer fireman in the Capital Region, Hluchova said she has been out on dozens of calls, most of them false alarms to -- of all places -- Siena College.

"We're here all the time," she said with a smile while rolling her eyes.

Hluchova said her most serious fires were at a building on Route 9, along with a few house and basement fires. She said she has suffered no injuries in the line of duty.

Total equipment weight? Forty to 50 pounds.

"I have always wanted to do something that was not easy," she said. "We do a lot of training during the time at the firehouse, so we'll know what we have to do when we have to go out on a fire. I've never been scared of this. I don't get scared."

As a tennis player, Hluchova had a 5-0 record at No. 1 singles for Siena during the fall season. She said she also plans to play in the spring, when 12 matches are scheduled.

During the winter, Hluchova is on ski patrol at Hunter Mountain.

She lives with Paris -- the fire chief -- and his wife and two daughters in their Colonie home.

After graduating from Siena, she said she hopes to get a job teaching tennis at a country club, preferably downstate. Whatever her career, she wants to remain a volunteer firefighter.

"I like doing this," she said. "That's why I do it. Tennis is important, but so is helping people."

Tim Wilkin can be reached at 454-5415 or by e-mail at twilkin@timesunion.com.