

Publication: Jnl Final Edition 8/2005-today; Date: Aug 22, 2008; Section: Sports; Page: D1



U.S. Team a Story of Hope

Solo Bats Away Questions, Brazil

By Helene Elliott Los Angeles Times

BEIJING — Exactly why goalkeeper Hope Solo dug into her bag to retrieve two homemade gold medals moments after the U.S. women's soccer team defeated Brazil in extra time to win the Olympic championship, placing one around her neck and clutching the other a scant few minutes before she would get a genuine medal, remains a mystery.

Solo repeatedly parried questions about it Thursday, after her stellar performance allowed the U.S. to hold off Brazil's early forays and made Carli Lloyd's 96th-minute goal hold up for a 1-0 victory on a soggy field at Workers' Stadium.

"There's no story behind that," said Solo, who stopped six shots on goal, including a dazzling, 72nd-minute save with her right hand on a blast by the clever forward Marta.

"There's really no story."

It's easy to guess one of the fakes stood in for the prize she believed would have been hers if she had started against Brazil in the semifinals of last year's World Cup, also played in China.

Solo was replaced by Briana Scurry for that game, a 4-0 loss. Afterward, Solo said she could have stopped the shots that eluded Scurry. For that disloyalty she was banished from the team and shunned by most of her teammates, a sentence lifted when Pia Sundhage succeeded Greg Ryan as the team's coach last November.

"Pia's just a great leader. She came in here and set a new tone for us," Solo said. "She brought in new players and created a new playing style, a new system.

"You had to forget everything in order to get this medal and win like we did tonight."

The significance of the second makeshift medal is more difficult to fathom.

It could have been for good luck. Or for consolation in case the U.S. women proved unable to subdue the spirited and skillful Brazilians.

This mystery may never be solved. It may not matter much, because Solo's sureness and her teammates' cohesiveness led the U.S. to a second successive Olympic title and third in four tournaments since women's soccer was added to the Games.

It also was the team's first major title since the pioneering players who were the face of the game for so long exited after a 2-1 overtime victory over Brazil at the 2004 Athens Games.

No one missed that point.

"It meant a lot to us to win this game because now it's no longer the Julie Foudy-Mia Hamm show, you know?" defender Kate Markgraf said.

"This team could actually win something."

When the brilliant Brazilians used their ball skills to dodge defenders, Solo was there to stymie them.

Solo, Brazil coach Jorge Barcellos said, "is a great player, especially on crossed balls. She is very assured."

She communicated that to her teammates.

"Hope was a rock in net for us," Amy Rodriguez said. "She had some unbelievable saves. Point blank, too. We're all so proud of her. We know she has our back and we have hers."

Forward Natasha Kai, brought in for her fresh legs during the first 15-minute extra-time period, said Solo's estrangement is no longer a topic of discussion.

"You forgive and you forget," Kai said. "Hope's an amazing person. She's a part of our team. We love her and we love each other, and that's the beauty of it."

All that love got each of them a beautiful gold medal.



RICARDO MAZALAN/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS Christie Rampone, left, with daughter Rylie Cate, and Kate Margraf, with son Keegan, celebrate the U.S.'s gold medal.





LUCA BRUNO/AP U.S. goalie Hope Solo was a rock in the net in the gold medal game against Brazil.