

More Valuable Than a Storybook Ending By Sally Jenkins

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SYDNEY, Sept. 28 - They had one thing left to show us: how to lose. What happened in the Olympic gold medal women's soccer match between the United States and Norway wasn't the happiest closing chapter, but in an odd way, it made things complete. To go out with a gold medal might have been the perfect sentimental ending for a group of players that had been together for 15 years, but, mercifully, the U.S. women have never been the sentimental types.

They are made of worthier and more intelligent stuff than that, and in the way they lost, they proved once and for all that we watch them for all the right reasons.

You want a great ending? How about the U.S. women play the game of their lives, better than in Atlanta in '96, and better even than in the 1999 World Cup when they beat China, how about they play gorgeously and tirelessly and through some dreadful screw ups for 102 minutes, and come back and deliver what has to be one of the most spectacularly thrilling Olympic moments for Americans since the Miracle on Ice, when Mia Hamm finds Tiffeny Milbrett for a tying goal with just 15 seconds left to force overtime ? and then they lose. They lose?

What's that all about?

It's about what a trip-wire life can be, obviously, and that's why, the next time you have a problem with your kid, when you are uncertain of how to deal with young Freemont or Francesca and feel tempted to consult a child-rearing manual or to call Dr. Laura, maybe you should just get a video of this USA soccer team, plant the child firmly in front of the screen, point at it, and say, "Do that. Do exactly what they do. Eat what they eat, drink what they drink (well, not all of it), and only take days off when they do." Then hope the kid turns out to have one half of the abidingly sound character of a Hamm or a Milbrett.

When you watch games for a living, you see a lot of stuff, and after awhile you understand that the games aren't really games but lab experiments in human behavior, and that athletes' behavior can be comedic, brave, fraudulent, seeking, uplifting and downright parasitical. Some of what you see you like, and some of it you don't like very much, and it's all very interesting, and eventually it makes you cynical because it ain't war and it ain't childbirth, either. But this team vaults lightly over cynicism and creeps into your heart.

They just don't know how to put a foot wrong.

"I don't think you have to be used to losing to be good at it," head coach April Heinrichs said. "It's easy to be a good citizen and outspoken and charismatic when you win. But I think you'll find those same qualities in them tonight."

They had a lot of complain about. They could have railed against the dumbfoundingly bad luck of the deciding goal in overtime, when Joy Fawcett's header for some reason careened straight into the elbow of Norway's Dagny Mellgren right in front of the U.S. goal, and she scored.

They could have argued that the goal should have been disallowed as a handball. They could have dissed goalie Siri Mullinix, whose rash decision to come out of the goal and chase a loose ball turned a harmless feed to into a go-ahead goal for Norway, 2-1, in regulation. Instead, no one said a word. "You can only look to yourself with these questions," Brandi Chastain said. "I only look within."

Their signature was their refusal to quit until they had exhausted every last possibility inside of themselves. In the past year, they had played a backbreaking schedule of 39 games, touring like the Harlem Globetrotters, spanning whole hemispheres from Boston to Beijing, playing too many games in too many countries. They toured because it was the best way to earn their keep from the U.S. soccer federation, and because they wanted to promote the game.

They didn't get a whole lot out of it, so it must have been love. "This has been a very trying year," said Chastain. "But this team has always found a way to band together. It's been like someone or something was trying to push us over the edge and make us give more than we have. But nobody ever quit, not once."

There have been more triumphant tournaments for this team. The Atlanta Games, where they became the darlings of capacity stadium crowds, and their World Cup victory in the Rose Bowl, were more gratifying from the applause standpoint.

Here, there was just a small band of Americans in two corners of the Sydney Football Stadium. Three husbands, some mothers and fathers. "You take what you can get, and we'll take 35 parents," Chastain said. But this was their single most revealing performance, more defining than their famous victories: they trailed 2-1 with three seconds left in regulation, and, unbelievably, would not accept the defeat. What happened then was strictly the stuff of lore.

Hamm, still on a dead run regardless of the clock, chased a ball into the corner, and lasered it across the mouth of the Norway goal, where Milbrett rose and perfectly timed a header into the net. "No way, no chance, that this team will ever give up," said Heinrichs afterward. "Not until they tell us to get off the field."

The ending wasn't storybook ? it was more valuable and instructive than that. A great ending is retired midfielder Michelle Akers, who with Hamm is considered the greatest women's soccer player ever, flying 20 hours on painkillers just three weeks after shoulder surgery, to see her team play.

"It's bizarre," she said. "I was unsure of how I would feel sitting in the stadium watching my team play. But actually, I feel a peace. I had done everything I could, and that's why I can sit and cheer for them authentically."

A great ending is captain Julie Foudy, who may very well have appeared in her last Olympic game, standing in front of a battery of cameras, and saying so gracefully, "Sometimes it's a generous game, and sometimes it's not."

A great ending is Milbrett, acknowledging that with three years to wait until another World Cup and four until the next Olympics, there will probably be several retirements, saying, "It won't be the same team it's been for the last ten years, no. It will be a new era, but a better one."

A great ending is Carla Overbeck, who has announced her retirement and will not play for the U.S. again, saying, "We can't stay away from each other.

This team will be vacationing together."

A great ending is Heinrichs, smiling in the face of it all, because her team had played, and behaved, so prettily. "They won a silver," she said, "but their game was golden."

"The greatest thing in this world is not so much where we are, but in what direction we are moving."

Oliver Wendell Holmes