

COURAGE OF A LION USA'S TOUGHEST PLAYER OVERCAME DAUNTING PHYSICAL CHALLENGES

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CLAREMONT – The match need not have any stakes. The tackle might be hopeless. But nothing that happens on a soccer field is insignificant to Michelle Akers.

If it were, how would you explain the way she played last February at Spartan Stadium in a match staged for no other purpose than hyping the Women's World Cup? Akers left the game with a slash in her forehead that took 25 stitches to close and three bones fractured around her eye.

If it were, how would you explain the way she played last Sunday at Stanford Stadium in a match that was already decided and in its waning moments? There was little chance Akers could win the ball from Brazilian defender Katia da Silva, and in the 90th minute of a 2-0 game, little reason to try. But Akers went sliding into her anyway.

Yellow card.

"Michelle!" screamed U.S. assistant coach Lauren Gregg. "We need you! . . . You're killing me!"

"She said, 'I saw the ball, and I had to have it.' That's all she was thinking about: I saw it, and I had to have it."

Nobody on the U.S. national team means more to its success than Akers, 33. She's an original player from 1985, its first goal scorer, its most tenacious player, its most wounded warrior.

What has happened to her on soccer fields around the world is the full catalog of reasons parents have always feared to let their daughters play the game.

Akers' inspiring courage is why little girls do.

"Michelle is the player that created international acceptance of the women's game," U.S. Coach Tony DiCicco said.

Always exhausted from chronic fatigue syndrome and its symptoms of headaches, nausea and dizziness, she wilted in the heat of Stanford Stadium in the first half against Brazil. Twice she was taken off the field on a stretcher, once after colliding head-to-head with Sissi in midair and once when Sissi swung her leg into a kick and cleated Akers in the face.

But after a halftime cup of coffee to raise her blood pressure, an IV to bring her back from dehydration and ice packs on her neck, Akers returned to put the game away with a penalty kick and send the United States into Saturday's World Cup championship match against China at the Rose Bowl.

She didn't get to the team's gold-medal celebration at the 1996 Olympics until 3 a.m. because she was taking IV fluids.

"Every time I play with Mich, I just shake my head and go, oh my God, just when you think she can't do any more, she's in there taking cleats in the face, getting knocked out," fellow midfielder Julie Foudy said.

"After the game she's smiling with an ice pack over her and she goes, 'What's with my head? Why is it such a magnet?' That's what I always tell kids. If you want to watch one player on the field, watch No. 10. What a phenomenal character, to watch her give every single minute of every single game everything she has."

Talk about courage. She's the only U.S. player to shun the ponytail 'do and let her full curly mane hang out on the field.

"Mufasa!" called out one of the thousand or so kids watching Team USA practice Thursday at Pomona-Pitzer College.

Akers, working on penalty kicks with her right leg, the one bearing the long, zipper-like scars of seven of her 12 knee operations, paused, turned her face with its blood-red scab across the bridge of her nose from Sissi's cleats, and waved back in recognition of her nickname from "The Lion King."

"I'm never going to let a fear of being injured change my mindset toward life or what I like to do for fun," she said a few minutes later.

As she aged and the injuries began to mount, DiCicco forced her off the front line and into the defensive midfield as much to protect Akers from herself as from the

punishment she took from opposing defenders. At the time she was the United States' leading career scorer, and she's still one of just four international players with 100 career goals.

"Once I'm sold, I'm sold, and I don't care what it costs to achieve that goal," Akers said.

More than any other factor, the knee injury that sidelined Akers in the first game of the 1995 World Cup is cited as causing the United States to lose to Norway and finish third. Four years earlier she managed to score a tournament-high 10 goals in leading the United States to the first women's world championship. It was only days after falling on a sprinkler head in practice, splitting her knee with a wound that required 35 stitches.

"I was her roommate one year in Portugal," defender Brandi Chastain said. "Just the amount of attention she has to pay to how she's feeling on a daily basis is a battle. There was a time when Michelle would have to administer her own shots four times a day just so she could feel good and go out to practice. Not to feel great, but just to feel good."

All she has to do in games is signal to DiCicco and she is removed, no questions asked. But the most difficult thing Akers has to do is realize she doesn't have enough steam to help her team and call for relief.

"During this kind of environment – preparing for the World Cup – I have taken some precautions," she said. "I haven't gone snow-skiing in a long time. I've limited my horseback riding, and I've been a little cautious in my water skiing. So I do take into consideration the responsibility for the team in my off-time, and if I do get injured on the field, that's acceptable and I'll be able to live with my team.

"If I get hurt doing something fun away from the field, then it's my team that's going to wring my neck."

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