

## **HISTORIC GOLD FOR U.S. WOMEN'S SOCCER TEAM TOPS CHINA 2-1 BEFORE 76,481**

**Author(s):**

JODY MEACHAM, Mercury News Staff Writer

**Date:** August 2, 1996

**Section:** Special Section

ATHENS, Ga. – For the low, low price of \$53 you could have bought yourself a piece of women's sports history Thursday night.

That would have gotten you one of the cheap seats for the United States' 2-1 gold-medal victory over China - the first women's Olympic soccer medal - before 76,481 fans, the world's largest women's soccer crowd and the largest in the United States to see a women's sporting event.

"It's a milestone for women's soccer, for women's sports in general," said winning goalkeeper Brianna Scurry, who allowed just two goals in the five-game tournament. "We were a little bit down (after China's tying goal), but the crowd picked us up a bit and brought us home."

"Just listen to them," said forward Mia Hamm. "This was perfect. That's what it means. They're excited about the game. It's electrifying to play in front of everyone here, and everyone enjoying themselves - that's what it's all about."

Forward Tiffeny Milbrett's goal in the 68th minute made the difference in the U.S. win. Shannon MacMillan, who scored the winning goal in the United States' 2-1 defeat of Norway during Sunday's semifinal, started against China. Nineteen minutes into the final, she put the U.S. team up 1-0.

Forward Kristine Lilly, one of six U.S. players with 100 or more games' international experience, brought the ball down the left side and hit Hamm, 20 yards out and to Chinese goalkeeper Gao Hong's left, with a crossing pass. Gao got a hand on Hamm's worm-burner and tipped it against the right goal post. But then the ball fluttered out to MacMillan, who had charged past the defense to score on the open shot.

"Oh my gosh! It's the best feeling in the world," said MacMillan, a former teammate of Milbrett's at the University of Portland. "It took 90 minutes to wear them down."

The United States maintained its lead until the 32nd minute when Chinese midfielder Sun Wen tied the score. It was a beautiful and ironic goal.

Last year at the second women's world championship in Sweden, Sun scored the tying goal in a 3-3 game against the United States. That tie knocked the defending-champion Americans into playing powerful Norway in a semifinal, which wound up as their only loss in world championship play and resulted in a bronze medal.

This time, Sun tied the score 1-1 by hitting a chip shot over the onrushing Scurry's left shoulder that Brandi Chastain's slider kick was a half step too late to save.

"I owe everything to the defense," Scurry said. "Brandi almost got that ball out from behind me."

The second half began as a back-and-forth defensive struggle. But in the 68th minute, MacMillan initiated a play that finished off China.

She sent a lead pass up the right side to former Cal star Joy Fawcett, who crossed left to midfielder Milbrett about 10 yards out. Gao got a fingertip on Milbrett's shot, but it wasn't enough to stop the Americans from taking a 2-1 lead.

"When we went into the locker room at halftime, we decided to put more pressure on their midfield," said Chastain, a former Santa Clara forward who now is the Broncos' assistant coach. "That allowed Mia, Tiffeny and Shannon to make diagonal runs."

Gao said, "To get to this match was all of our dreams. It is very disappointing that we lost, though.

"It doesn't feel good because we allowed the United States to score and win the match. We did not capitalize on our opportunities."

Hamm, who is perhaps the finest woman soccer player in the world, was carried off on a stretcher with an injured left ankle in the final moments.

When the game ended, she celebrated with her teammates and said, "From the very beginning this has been an entire team effort, and this is what you saw tonight."

Forward Michelle Akers, asked to describe her feelings, grinned and said, "Without swearing? Immense joy. Incredible satisfaction. Praise the Lord. After the past five years of ups and downs, and mostly downs, it's all been worth it."

In the bronze-medal game, Norway defeated Brazil 2-0 on a pair of first-half goals by Ann Aarones, which she scored in a three-minute span.

Copyright (c) 1996 San Jose Mercury News