

SEALED WITH A KICK. U.S. WINS ON SCURRY'S SAVE, CHASTAIN'S SHOT

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PASADENA – The two teams had melted to the brink of exhaustion Saturday from two hours of futility, running the length of the Rose Bowl's 115-yard pitch without a goal being scored.

Mercy was more in demand than justice in deciding the Women's World Cup.

Brandi Chastain provided it with the winning penalty kick to give the United States the shootout victory over China for the championship.

The teams played a tense, scoreless tie that extended through 90 minutes of regulation and two 15-minute overtimes. Not a soul among the crowd of 90,185 left the stadium.

"It's a credit to the U.S. team," Coach Tony DiCicco said. "I'm delighted that we won this tournament. To make all five penalty kicks in a pressure-cooker environment like this, Bri (U.S. goalkeeper Briana Scurry) making a save, brought a storybook ending to a team that has its place in history."

A lot of history was written in the match.

It was the United States' second championship in the three World Cups, and coupled with its gold medal in the 1996 Atlanta Olympics – also over China – certified Team USA's credentials as the best in the world. The crowd, which included President Clinton, was the largest to attend a women's sports event. The previous high – 78,792 – came in the United States' World Cup opener against Denmark in East Rutherford, N.J.

Much of the story was written by a suspect U.S. defense, led for the second consecutive game by Scurry and midfielder Michelle Akers, that came up with its best game of the tournament.

Scurry's save on Liu Ying's third-round penalty kick – a sprawling dive to her left to punch the shot wide – was the difference in the tiebreaker, and it was a save Scurry said she envisioned before it happened.

"I was out of my mind right then," Scurry said. "I was really focused. I had the feeling when she was walking up that I could get that one. I can't really explain why that is or how that is, but I looked her and I had a feeling."

More than instinct

But Scurry didn't rely entirely on instinct. She pushed the rules requiring the keeper to remain on the goal line until the kick as far as allowable.

"You come out if you can for a little bit to cut down the angle," she said.

Was she moving too soon?

"A little bit. But it's only illegal if they call it. Just like tripping people in the penalty box isn't against the rules unless they call it."

Kristine Lilly followed Liu to the penalty spot, and after netting her shot, the United States had a 3-2 lead that it maintained throughout the shootout, clinched by Chastain's left-footer at the end.

China was content to play defense first, hoping for the counterattack goal, and the United States was reluctant to commit itself fully forward because of its past experience with that Chinese tactic. China's winning goals in the two matches it took from the United States earlier this year came on counterattacks that got behind the forward-pressing U.S. defense.

"That's our style," Chinese Coach Ma Yuanan said. "We tried to defend first and then counterattack. We were really disappointed."

Just a few chances

The best U.S. chances came in the 12th minute, when goalkeeper Gao Hong saved a 30-yard rifle shot by Akers, and a cross from Lilly in the 85th minute that was a hair high for an open Tiffeny Milbrett header. Mia Hamm had two of the four U.S. shots on goal, but neither of Hamm's were dangerous.

The U.S. midfield was able to stop most of China's penetrations during regulation, and when it wasn't, the U.S. back four were superb. Scurry made only two saves.

Chastain stopped Chinese midfielder Pu Wei on the end line and forced a goal kick in the 20th minute. In the 90th minute, Chinese forward Zhang Ouying dribbled across the

top of the box until Chastain came sliding in with a tackle that broke up a possible winning play.

Akers, carried off the field twice with injuries in last Sunday's semifinal against Brazil, was winning balls all over the field until she went down again in a collision with Scurry in the final minute of regulation.

"To her credit, she was tired out there, but she did not want to come out of the game," Scurry said of Akers, who suffers from chronic fatigue syndrome. "Unfortunately she had a little bit of dizziness there after getting her bell rung. She did not want to come out, and she very much contributed to the game."

Akers was in her usual post-game position – on her back in the locker room getting an IV to combat dehydration and exhaustion – and unavailable for interviews.

But the biggest defensive play for the U.S. team came in the first 15-minute overtime period – the only stretch of the match dominated by China – on a corner kick from Liu. The ball sailed across the box to defender Fan Yunjie, who headed it past Scurry for what seemed like the game-winner.

Lilly, who guards the near post on corners, was standing on the goal line and saved it with a header.

"I did my job," said Lilly, the world's most capped player with 186 international appearances. "I was there at the right spot. I headed it at the right time. It was awesome."

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