

WITH ONE KICK, S.J.'S CHASTAIN REALIZES DREAM

Author(s):

JODY MEACHAM, Mercury News Staff Writer

Date: July 11, 1999

Section: Front

PASADENA – Four times the Rose Bowl had been shaken to its foundations by the concussive roar of more than 90,000 fans when U.S. penalty kicks slammed into the back of the net.

Four times the ancient stadium had sighed with a single breath as China's penalty kicks had struck the same cords.

The United States and China had played to a scoreless draw through 120 minutes of sun-seared, heat-exhausted soccer Saturday in the Women's World Cup final. Then, through 4 1/2 rounds of penalty kicks, they were deadlocked 4-4.

It was Brandi Chastain's time to decide the championship of the world.

She never looked at goalkeeper Gao Hong. She listened only for the whistle, and when it sounded through the silent bowl, she drilled a left-footed rocket into the top right corner of the goal for a U.S. victory.

"I thought, 'My God, this is the greatest moment of my life on a soccer field,' " said Chastain, who starred at Mitty High and Santa Clara University and became a national figure during the World Cup with her popular appearance on the David Letterman show and a risqué pose in Gear magazine, wearing only cleats and clutching a soccer ball.

It wasn't redemption, said Chastain, 30, a veteran of the first U.S. championship team in 1991.

But it certainly looked like it.

The last penalty kick she had taken was March 20 in Loule, Portugal, in the Algarve Cup, and it was against China. It came in the second half of the championship game, and it struck the crossbar, ricocheting over the goal.

A bad memory

The memory of that failure had haunted Chastain often in the four months building up to Saturday's rematch.

"I felt I let my team down," she said. "In this environment, with these players, everybody works so hard that they want the outcome of winning because they have prepared themselves and because they have put themselves on the line. They don't look at you and say, 'You let us down,' but you feel like that inside because you want to give everything you have and do everything the right way."

To that memory was added the own goal Chastain scored in the July 1 quarterfinal in Landover, Md. Attempting to get the ball away from Germany's onrushing attackers, Chastain sent a back pass toward unprepared goalkeeper Briana Scurry that rolled into the net for a 1-0 Germany lead.

But in the second half, Chastain brought the United States back from its second deficit with a short volley off a corner kick to tie the score at 2-2. The U.S. team won 3-2.

"This was about satisfaction," she said of Saturday's winning kick. "It wasn't about redemption. It was more completing the circle. I started in '91 with this team. These people have been part of my life for a long time. These are the people I go to when I need answers, when I need help or a shoulder to lean on. They're always there for me. Likewise, I wanted to be there for them today. I just closed a chapter in this wonderful book of soccer."

Looking ahead, back

It's not the last chapter, she said. Next year's Sydney Olympics await the U.S. players, the defending gold medalists.

And it wasn't just one circle that was closed.

Chastain, a forward in the '91 World Cup, was left off a forward-laden roster for the '95 tournament and had to move back to defender to regain a spot on the team. It could have meant the end of her scoring days.

She is a naturally right-footed player who was forced to train her left as a 10-year-old in the Blossom Valley Youth Soccer League when she sprained her right ankle. Although she took the penalty kick last March with her right foot, she had lost confidence in it.

Chastain steps in

She might not even have been in the first five shootout kickers for the United States had Michelle Akers, who scored on a penalty kick in the Stanford Stadium semifinal against Brazil, not been injured in the final minute of regulation and left the game.

When regulation and both 15-minute periods of overtime elapsed without a goal, it was U.S. assistant coach Lauren Gregg's job to set the order for the five rounds of penalty kicks, in which each team alternates using one shooter 12 yards in front of the goal.

"I just wanted to make sure Brandi wanted the fifth spot," Gregg said. "I knew it could come down to that position. So I asked her, 'Do you want one?' and, 'Are you going to make it?'"

"She said 'yes' and 'yes.' "

Chastain said things were oddly quiet in her head. No haunting memories, no sound from the crowd.

"I didn't get caught looking at Gao (the goalkeeper)," she said. "Sometimes, she likes to get into your head by staring at you, smiling at you, making you feel real uneasy. But I didn't look at her, and as soon as the whistle blew I just stepped up and hit it."

When the crowd erupted, Chastain ripped off her No. 6 shirt, stretched her arms heavenward, and then was smothered by Mia Hamm.

"Momentary insanity," she said. "Nothing more, nothing less."

Copyright (c) 1999 San Jose Mercury News