

LEFT OFF THE '95 TEAM, LEFT BACK PUTS LEFT, AND BEST, FOOT FORWARD. CHASTAIN BACK IN STEP ON BACK LINE

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BEAVERTON, Ore. – Brandi Chastain was laid off. It was as simple as that.

It was as if she were a quarterback, and her team already had Joe Montana and Steve Young. She was a soccer forward on a team that included Michelle Akers, April Heinrichs, Carin Gabarra and Mia Hamm.

And there wasn't another national team she could play for. The U.S. women flew to Sweden for the 1995 World Cup and left Chastain, who had played two of the six games in the 1991 World Cup, home in San Jose to watch on TV.

"I battled with myself a little bit," Chastain says. "I did want to watch, and I did not."

"She didn't watch much," said her husband, Jerry Smith, the women's soccer coach at Santa Clara. "That is a very deep wound for her."

Whether she was treated fairly in the layoff process may never be known. The ill feelings between Chastain and Anson Dorrance, the U.S. coach when she was excluded from the national player pool, are very deep.

But Chastain had more game than just a scoring touch, and by the 1996 Olympics she had reinvented herself as the most versatile player on the gold medal-winning U.S. team – a skillful zone defender and a play-making midfielder.

Part of the reason was her left foot, and all of the reason she was so good with it was because she hurt her right one when she was a 10-year-old striker in the Blossom Valley Youth Soccer League.

"I twisted my right ankle so I couldn't point my toe down and strike the ball with my instep," she said. "So I had to start kicking the ball with my left foot."

Rare dexterity

On a soccer team most see as the best in the world, there is a marked shortage of players with strong left feet. Midfielder Kristine Lilly is naturally left-footed. Akers, now a midfielder, and Chastain are two-footed.

There is no position so demanding of left-footed skill as left back. It's like an offensive left tackle on a football team with a right-handed quarterback, someone who protects the QB's blind-side when he drops back to pass.

Except in soccer, left back is the player who stands in the way of the opposing team's right-sided attacking tendency. And when her team has the ball, a left back with the skill to come forward and join in the attack usually faces her opponent's weak spot on defense.

That's where Chastain plays.

"It's hard to go from scoring all the goals to not scoring all the goals," she said. "But it was easy to take this position because it was the only option. Roberto Carlos (of Brazil) is a left back that people fear and know that at any time he can go forward and score a goal. That's the kind of thing that I would like to do.

"I want other teams to have to worry about: Am I coming? Am I staying back? Am I going forward? What am I doing with the ball? If they do that, it takes their focus away from somebody else, and maybe for that split second we can take advantage of them."

Still, her left foot isn't all that makes her valuable.

"She's soccer savvy," said teammate Julie Foudy. "On this team she's the player who watches the most soccer, studies the most soccer. She picks up a lot of things from that." Dorrance said, "My assumption is that the games Brandi watches are the cutting-edge men's international games because some of the deception she demonstrates when she plays is not the sort of deception that she's learned from her counterparts on the women's side."

Chastain has attended three men's World Cup tournaments. She honeymooned at the last one.

SCU assistant

"She is a student of the game," said U.S. Coach Tony DiCicco. "Probably more than any other player on this team she has tremendous sophistication on the field."

Which is as it should be for a 30-year-old who makes her living as Santa Clara's assistant women's coach. It also means the United States has an incomparably sophisticated back line, since Chastain plays alongside captain Carla Overbeck, Duke's assistant coach.

On the verge of this World Cup, Chastain sees herself as part of a historic team. The United States was the first women's team to win a World Cup, it won the first women's gold medal in Olympic soccer, and now it can win another world championship in an event of true international magnitude.

"This is going to be the largest event in women's sports ever," she said. "As soccer players, everybody wants to participate in the World Cup. That's the ultimate goal. You want people to look at you as the best in the world. For me personally, it's satisfaction of knowing that I never gave up on what I truly believed in as a soccer player and as a person. I knew in my heart down deep when other people weren't giving me credit there was a place for me on this team."

She's proved it.

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