

From the U.S. Soccer Communications Center – February 26, 2003

Coming off arguably the most successful year in U.S. Soccer history, the U.S. Soccer Federation is celebrating their 90-year anniversary throughout 2003 with a number of special projects and events. As part of the year-long commemoration, the U.S. Soccer Communications Center will produce weekly articles looking back at the organization's history. Through the Communications Center articles, you will not only revisit some of U.S. Soccer's crowning achievements, but you will also learn about the people and events that shaped the Federation's first 90 years.

This week, we share with you a comprehensive feature on goalkeeper Briana Scurry, clearly the most dominant women's goalkeeper of all-time, as she reflects on her time with the U.S. Women's National Team and on the incredible summer of 1999. Her career numbers don't lie: 113 career caps, 58 shutouts, a 0.61 goals against average and a staggering 88 career victories, all U.S. Soccer records.

This article and many others will be published this summer in the limited-edition 90-Year Anniversary book commemorating U.S. Soccer.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE – BRIANA SCURRY

“THIS WAS THE ONE”

Briana Scurry knew this was the one.

As China's Liu Ying stepped up to take her country's third penalty kick during the pressure-packed shootout at the 1999 Women's World Cup Final, Scurry knew something that the 90,000 fans at the Rose Bowl, the 40 million watching on TV in the U.S. and the one billion people watching around the world didn't know.

This was the one.

Scurry knew for the same reason she might be the best big-game goalkeeper in the history of women's soccer.

She knew because when everything around her is moving at high speed, she is calm and focused.

She knew because she enjoys being the last line of defense and saying, “Team, count on me.”

Scurry is at her best when it means the most, and mostly that's because she possesses that special intangible quality – mental toughness – that allows her to perform at the highest level.

“What I see in Bri is an extremely high level of concentration and focus, that when combined with her competitiveness, allows her to excel in big games,” said former U.S. Women's National Team goalkeeper coach Eric Yamamoto. “That she can bring that attitude consistently to training or whenever she steps on the field is what prepares her for the big games. Her focus is outstanding.”

Liu struck the ball with good pace, but the 5-foot-9 Scurry stepped hard out of her goal and flew to her left, stretching her full frame to bat the shot away as the stadium erupted in a patriotic, adrenalin-filled fervor that one seldom experiences in a lifetime.

“The Save” set the stage for Brandi Chastain's winning kick and Scurry's screaming, fist-pumping celebration would grace TV screens across the world for weeks to come. Years from now it will be replayed as a seminal moment in the history of women's sports.

“It was bizarre,” said Scurry. “I didn't look at any of the other kickers, but for some reason, when I was walking into the goal, I looked at (Liu) and I heard something in my head, ‘this is the one.’ It was just a feeling. Something just came over me, a sort of calmness. It was an instinctual thing, an intuitive thing. It was very, very strange. Quite honestly, I think no matter where that ball was going to go, I was going to get it.”

She did, and that's what separates Scurry from the rest. She has the confidence, the consistency and the ability to mentally focus at times when everything indicates an athlete should go to pieces.

Her coach during the 1999 Women's World Cup, Tony DiCicco, first brought her to the

national team, seeing in her tremendous talent that needed molding. DiCicco gave her the training, and the games, to develop into a world champion.

"Briana Scurry has the two most important components of goalkeeping," said DiCicco, who coached the U.S. goalkeepers from 1990 to 1999, first as the goalkeeper coach and then as the head coach. "She has special athletic ability to make extraordinary saves and, more importantly, the ability, as the tension in the game builds, to actually get calmer. Her poise translates to confidence in her team."

The irony here is that while Scurry knew, she has no idea how she knew. Like so many elite athletes who find themselves in "the zone," they are not quite sure how they got there.

"I've always had it, and to be honest with you, I don't know where it comes from. I have no idea," said Scurry of her ability to perform in big games. "An extra calmness comes over me that seems misplaced in the situation that I'm actually in. That's how I feel in a big game. I've been in a car that has spun off an icy highway and into a ditch. I felt complete calmness when the car was spinning around. It's the same calmness I feel in a game. I can't teach it, I can't read about it, I can't tell you about, it just is."

The big game. Scurry has played in a lot of them, but the one game that looms the largest is a match she didn't play in – the 2000 Olympic Final.

Rewind to 1999 and the whirlwind of instant fame admittedly got to Scurry. The appearances, the media and all the attention conspired to cause Scurry to lose focus, lose fitness and once the team re-grouped for the run to the Olympics, lose her job as the USA's starting 'keeper.

The most focused goalkeeper in the world losing focus? It happened. And when she crashed, she crashed hard.

Her lack of fitness led to a string of injuries, and months away from the team to rehab. During her absence, Siri Mullinix took over the top spot. Scurry regained her health and rejoined the team almost at the last possible moment to be included in the Olympic Team, but by that time, Mullinix had solidified her position and the confidence of the players and head coach April Heinrichs. Scurry knew it was a situation of her own making, but that didn't make it any less painful.

"It was very difficult for me," admitted Scurry. "I had been the starter for seven years, give or take a few months. I went away to rehab my leg and I got back in shape and was actually playing quite well when I went back to the team, so it was tremendously disappointing. It was tough to sit on the bench at the Olympics. But I was going to do the best for my team and be utilized where ever they needed me."

Only three goalkeepers have won world championships in the history of women's soccer: Mary Harvey for the USA in 1991, Norway's Bente Nordby, who was in the nets for the 1995 Women's World Cup title and the 2000 Olympic Final, and Scurry, who won an Olympic title in 1996 and a Women's World Cup in 1999.

Watching from the bench in Sydney convinced Scurry she wanted another, but it would be two years before she completely worked herself back into the picture.

"In 1999 everything went so much better than planned," said Scurry. "We won and it was just a windfall of exciting things happening. I'd always wanted to go out the way I wanted to go out, and in 2000, after the injuries and everything, that wasn't what I had in mind."

Her mind. That's what got her back. Scurry decided that in order to regain her spot on the national team, she needed to change, and change is one of the hardest things for any human being. You need a powerful will, and that comes from a powerful mind. Scurry had it – she just had to find it again.

"I decided that in the two WUSA seasons, I was going to make a run for the National Team again," said Scurry, who dropped out of the national team picture for a span of 20 months from November of 2000 to July of 2002. "But I knew I had to start with myself and I basically changed everything about me. I changed my training regimen and started getting in the weight room. I completely revamped my body, the way I ate, what I ate and everything else."

Scurry didn't want the old her, but a whole new goalkeeper.

"I started doing a lot more cardio, running on a treadmill, a lot more fitness," she said. "I was taxing my body to the limit and my goal was to be the fittest player on the team, not just the fittest goalkeeper, and try to be the strongest as well."

I basically hibernated in the weight room for eight months. I went five days a week. My first priority was my legs, getting them strong enough, having enough power for the jumping, the agility, the quickness and endurance of goalkeeping. I basically said to myself, I have to be ready for anything and everything to excel."

It worked. Heinrichs, who had been communicating with Scurry for several months, gave her another shot and Scurry returned to the national team after an almost two-year absence for a friendly match in the summer of 2002. In more irony, the match was against Norway, the team she sat and watched defeat the USA at the Olympics.

"Bri has had one of the most stunning turnarounds I've ever witnessed in sport," said Heinrichs. "She's a different person, player and teammate than she was in 2000. What is most exciting about Bri's return is her mind and body are the best I've ever seen. With continued games for her club and the national team, the sky is the limit."

The "new" Scurry was a lean, mean goalkeeping machine. She played the second half, and while she had little to do, many things were the same. She was focused and sharp, and didn't allow a goal.

"I was nervous, scared, exhilarated – all of the above – that I was being invited back into camp," she said. "Nervousness was something I never really experienced too much on the National Team, but I had committed so much time and energy to getting back that it was a little scary in seeing how it would turn out."

While her body was definitely finely-tuned, would her mind follow? For Scurry, her transformation was as much about personal growth as it was physical growth. Her body was ready, because her mind was in a good place too.

"I wasn't so much scared, as not knowing for sure what was going to happen. I knew I'd done everything I could and completely transformed everything about me. I basically became a much happier person in general. My life was so much better since I discovered a new-found passion and commitment, not only to soccer, but to bettering myself as a person. I think my drive to get back to the National Team is what created that in the rest of my life as well."

A happy Scurry has always meant a happy U.S. defense. By far the leader in appearances, wins and shutouts for U.S. goalkeepers, Scurry has created a legacy for all future net-minders to follow. But throughout her career it has been her dedication to her teammates that has stood out, making even more painful her inability to help them during the Olympics.

"I appreciate the honor of having been the starting goalkeeper for so long," said Scurry, who will for years to come be the only U.S. 'keeper to have surpassed 100 caps. "I have so much respect for my teammates, and if one of them makes a mistake, and I have to make a big save, I am more than willing, because it's my job, and because every player on the team does their job so well 95% of the time. It's only in that other 5% of the time that I'm called upon to do mine. If you look at it that way, I owe them my best effort every single time because the ratio is just so slanted."

Scurry's greatest performance in a U.S. uniform, one in which the "ratio" was perhaps slanted her way, was overshadowed by the 1999 Women's World Cup Final. She was actually called upon to do more, much more, in the semifinal game against a confident Brazilian team that almost danced its way past the USA on July 4, 1999, at Stanford Stadium in Palo Alto, Calif.

"That was by far the best game I ever played in my life, hands down," said Scurry, who closed the goal while making six saves as Brazil out-shot the USA 13-10, only to lose 2-0 in front of 73,123 fans. "If I were to look back on all the saves I've made in my career, I probably had four of the most brilliant ones in that game. Playing on the national team, you don't often have much to do, but in that game, oh my, I felt like it was (central defender) Carla (Overbeck) and myself against the entire country of Brazil."

Scurry tipped shots over the crossbar from seemingly impossible angles, was off her line to destroy chances before they became dangerous, was dominant in the air on crosses and frustrated the Brazilians all afternoon, allowing an early Cindy Parlow goal to stand up before Michelle Akers clinched the match with a late penalty kick.

"The reason I felt so good after that game is that for one of the few times with the national team I actually felt that I pulled my own weight," said Scurry. "Field players have had great games a lot more often than me because of the dominating nature of the team. I was called upon to have a big game and I was able to do it. It was a great feeling to come through for my team."

As one of the pioneers of the women's soccer in the USA and the world, Scurry appreciates what she has accomplished, but says that she never looks back. Well, almost never.

"The only time I look back is if I'm about to move apartments and I see a poster and or something from the World Cup and Olympics," said Scurry, who has sets her sights on the 2003 Women's World Cup. "I am not willing to look back on my career until I am finished with it, with the exception of 2000, which I think about every day, so I don't forget what happened to me. I just want to be there standing on the field for the first game in China. That's all that really matters to me."

While Scurry may not revel in her accomplishments, history surely will. It will show that the goalkeeper with a black panther tattoo on her shoulder brought those same qualities to the position: catlike quickness, fearlessness, an incredible leaping ability, unearthly focus, and the mentality to go for the kill at exactly the right time.

"I don't think about my career because I've got more improving to do," said Scurry. "I've got higher levels to reach. I can honestly say in the next year, I will be better than I was in all the past years. The difference between now and then is that before I was striving to be the best goalkeeper, which meant better than everybody else. Now I'm just striving to be the best goalkeeper Briana Scurry can be."

And that just might be better than anyone else has ever been.