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VOLLEYBALL



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U.S. women spiked in volleyball prelims

Americans dealt second loss of Games in five-set thriller

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Greg Baker / AP

The Dominican Republic's Annerys Vargas Valdez is hugged by teammate Cosiris Rodriguez after they pulled off a stunning five-set upset over the U.S. team in women's volleyball

AP Associated Press

Updated: 10:52 a.m. ET Aug. 19, 2004

ATHENS, Greece - After losing to the Dominican Republic just once in 25 previous meetings, the United States didn't expect any problems beating the first-time Olympians.

But a sluggish start by the Americans, some Dominican determination and, of course, the rally-scoring system — volleyball's great equalizer — all added up to a pretty big upset.

Milagros Cabral de la Cruz had the match-winning kill in

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the fifth set, giving the Dominican Republic a 26-24, 22-25, 27-25, 23-25, 19-17 victory Wednesday.

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"We just put ourselves in a very, very difficult situation," U.S. coach Toshi Yoshida said.

Dropping to 1-2, the U.S. faces sixth-place Russia on Friday and fifth-place Cuba on Sunday to close the first round of the tournament. The top four in the six-team pool advance.

The Americans could still make the medal round even by losing one of their next two matches, but they risk an undesirable quarterfinal matchup with Pool A leaders Brazil or Italy. The best bet, of course, would be winning the next two, making for a more favorable matchup and some needed momentum.

"We just have to take care of our team and hope that it will fall into place," reserve outside hitter Ogonna Nnamani said.

Tayyiba Haneef led the Americans with 20 points on 18 kills and two aces, and Logan Tom added 16 kills. Cabral de la Cruz scored 21 points, and Yudelkys Bautista had 15 kills and five blocks for the Dominicans.

In the fourth set, Tom's spike attempt glanced off Bautista's forearm and into the net to even the match at 2-2 after the Dominicans fended off set point three times.

Reaching match point twice in the fifth set, the Americans couldn't put it away. De la Cruz wound up and spiked the winner off a diving Nnamani.

"We are all very happy," Dominican libero Evelyn Carrera Pichardo said through a translator. "We played very aggressively, and we showed the people a wonderful match.

"We fought each point. We had faith until the end. ... We do not feel inferior toward any other teams."

The Dominicans earned a spot in the Athens Games by winning the South American qualifying tournament in January. They opened this tournament getting swept by Russia and China.

Though inexperienced, they're full of enthusiasm and built in the mold of the

FINAL MEDAL COUNT

	G	S	B	TOT
USA	35	39	29	103
RUS	27	27	38	92
CHN	32	17	14	63
AUS	17	16	16	49
GER	14	16	18	48

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BROADBAND

athletic Cubans, winners of the last three golds.

"It's just an example of how the Olympics is," Nnamani said. "Doesn't matter what team you are, or where you're from, or what you're about or what you've done in the past. It's all about right now."

Right now, the Americans' gold hopes are shaken. Several players were visibly distraught as they left the Peace and Friendship Stadium court.

"We have to rebound, hope for the best and rise to the occasion," middle blocker Danielle Scott said.

A 9 a.m. start didn't help the Americans, whose previous two matches — and the next two — are all at night.

"The Dominicans have played in the morning all tournament and were probably a little more used to the hours," middle blocker Heather Bown said. "We just came out a little flat, and you the need the fire and you need the energy in every match when you're here because everybody is going after the USA.

"We have to go on the court with that attitude that we've got to defend everything we've got."

After losing the opening set, the Americans evened the match with a sequence involving two of their key backups. Setter Lindsey Berg, subbing for Robyn Ah Mow-Santos on the previous point to serve, gave opposite Nancy Metcalf a perfect fingertip pass at the net.

Metcalf, a former All-American at Nebraska who is perhaps the team's hardest hitter, finished the second set with a vicious left-handed spike that landed in the middle of the back row.

A kill by Haneef gave the U.S. team set point in the third, but the Dominicans staved that off twice and then won it on a blocking error by Haneef while trying to stop a spike by Kenia Moreta Perez.

"We had so many unforced errors," Yoshida said. "We knew that the Dominican Republic was strong. ... We knew that they could play like that."

South Korea wins

South Korea swept Kenya in three straight sets, winning 25-16, 25-20, and 25-19.

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