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VOLLEYBALL



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ATHENS04



U.S. staves off elimination in women's volleyball

Inspired win over Cuba puts Americans in quarterfinals vs. Brazil

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Morry Gash / AP

USA's Stacy Sykora (5), Logan Tom (15) and Lindsey Berg (4) react after their volleyball preliminary round match against Cuba, Sunday. USA won 25-22, 25-12, 25-19.

VOLLEYBALL ROUNDUP

AP Associated Press

Updated: 1:33 a.m. ET Aug. 23, 2004

ATHENS, Greece - The U.S. women's volleyball players happily trickled off the court, stopping to chat with family and friends and answer questions about how they salvaged their chance at an Olympic medal.

Perhaps a more fitting exit would have had all 12 of them holding hands, because the Americans finally figured out how to play like a team.

Logan Tom scored 19 points to lead the United States to a 25-22, 25-12, 25-19 win over Cuba on Sunday and a spot in the quarterfinals.

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"We weren't playing for each other," Tom said. "We were playing for individuals, especially the first few matches. I don't know if I'm supposed to say that, but that what's it felt like.

"We're having a lot more fun, which is how it should be."

Since a young, promising squad finished a surprising fourth at the Sydney Games, hopes have been high.

With Tom developing into one of the world's best outside hitters, the return in 2002 of the veteran Phipps and dazzling potential at the opposite position with the 6-foot-7 Haneef, the Americans have been steadily moved into the world's elite.

SLIDE SHOW



Launch

• **Visions of gold: Aug. 29**

Demark throws for handball gold, Argentina takes it to the net and Britain's Mark Lewis-Francis jumps for joy.

But China reminded everyone who the gold medal favorite was in an opening four-set victory. The Americans recovered to beat Germany before a devastating blow — a stunning five-set defeat to the Dominican Republic.

While they were markedly improved in the next match against Russia, after a pep talk from the veterans on the undefeated American softball team, the result was the same. So it all came down to this one.

"Russia, I think, was a stepping stone for us," middle blocker Danielle Scott said. "We really started to concentrate on our team and not on individuals — playing for each other, which I think we had lost a little bit."

Keba Phipps slammed the winning kill on match point, prompting an exuberant group hug near the net with libero Stacy Sykora leading the celebration in the middle of it.

"Hopefully, it's just going to get better from here," Phipps said.

It might get better, but it won't get easier: The price for finishing 2-3 in pool play

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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

- Complete medal count
- U.S. medal winners

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BROADBAND

is a pairing with unbeaten Brazil in Tuesday's quarterfinals.

"They are tough," Scott said.

Surely, though, the Brazilians can't be happy about a matchup against the team that began the Summer Games with the international federation's top ranking.

"If we play as a team, I think anything can happen," U.S. coach Toshi Yoshida said.

Zoila Barros Fernandez had four aces among her nine points for three-time defending gold medalist Cuba, which fell to third place in the group and will play Italy in the next round. China takes on Japan and Russia plays Korea in the other quarterfinals.

"It was an important match for us, but we could not overcome our problems as a team," Barros Fernandez said through an interpreter. "I am sure we will do it in the next round, though. We will be much better from now on."

The Americans toughed out a tight first set, scoring the last three points — two on kills by Tayyiba Haneef and the last on a sneaky poke by Tom of a ball that was floating unclaimed just above the net.

The U.S. team took an 8-1 lead in the second set and sailed from there — partially muting a loud, pro-Cuba crowd that adorned a large section of the upper bowl with Cuban flags and chanted their country's name frequently throughout the match.

"I was like 'Where did all those Cubans come from?'" Phipps said. "I was pretty amazed. When they have big crowds like that, the fun part is shutting them up."

Several of Cuba's stars from the past Summer Games have retired, including the great Regla Torres, who was named volleyball's top female player of the 20th century. But the Cubans are still a powerful, athletic team — as they proved in wins over Russia, China and the Dominicans.

"Cuba was probably not as hyped up as they normally would be," Phipps said. "They're already in. They probably want us to eliminate Brazil for them."

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