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VOLLEYBALL

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Tuesday, September 26

U.S. finesse finally puts away South Korea
 Associated Press

SYDNEY, Australia -- If the U.S. women's volleyball team goes on to win a medal, South Korea should at least get a few shavings.

The Americans, going toe to toe with the best defensive team at the Olympics, prevailed in an incredibly close five-game match and advanced to the semifinals for the first time since 1992.

The teams went back and forth for more than two hours, but ultimately it was a contested call that decided the 26-24, 17-25, 25-23, 25-27, 16-14 victory Tuesday.

After Logan Tom dropped in a dink over the block to end a typically long rally and give the U.S. team a 15-14 lead, South Korea's Ku Min-Jung fired a ball down the left line that the official called out. The South Koreans protested, but the Americans jumped up and down in celebration.

The Americans will face Russia in the semifinals.

Tom and Danielle Scott had most of the big hits for the Americans, getting 46 kills between them. But Kerri Walsh, a former teammate of Tom's at Stanford who had just recovered from an injury, was the key. Normally a blocker, she came in to disrupt the South Koreans with her hitting, and she also turned a stint at setter for a while.



Danielle Scott sets to spike the ball against the South Korean defense.

Walsh made two spectacular plays that helped the U.S. team come back from a 12-9 deficit in the fifth game, which in this match was a huge lead.

After Scott scored points with a kill and block, Walsh chased down a hopelessly wide ball near the U.S. bench. Tom ended up with the winner to tie it.

On the next play, Walsh dove to get an index finger on a spike, and Tom wound up with the kill again.

The U.S. team said the day before the match that it would have to be mentally strong enough to weather some long points, but they couldn't have predicted such a marathon.

Each game had its own drama, with the difference between the teams so slight that one hand on the ball was enough to decide crucial points.

The United States jumped to a 6-1 lead to start the match behind the leaping shots of Tom, who had seven kills in the opening game. Tied at 24, the Americans squeezed out the win when Tara Cross-Battle dropped in a dink over the block and Heather Bown got a service ace.

South Korea couldn't have played better in the second game, jumping to a 10-4

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lead and keeping the pressure on.

The South Koreans, in addition to having the quickness to chase down balls other teams can't, have a creative offense that uses all their hitters at all front-row positions. Setter Kang Hye-Mi varied the speed and height of her feeds to teammates, and South Korea kept the Americans off-balance all game.

The United States came back by turning to Walsh, who sat out the first two matches of group play recovering from an ankle injury suffered in the Grand Prix last month, to attack on the wings. She was shaky at times, but ultimately it jump-started the U.S. attack.

With more depth among the hitters, the Americans never trailed past the first few points of the third, but it was close anyway.

South Korea saved two game points to get within 24-23, but Walsh delivered a stinging smash from the right side for the winner. Setter Robyn Ah Mow had Scott on her left but went to Walsh instead, and it worked.

The Americans had to scratch and claw to get back into the fourth game, only to lose it at the end. South Korea led 24-21 but the U.S. team ran off three straight points. The South Koreans forged ahead, and Chung Sun-Hye drove a shot past Walsh and Bown to square the match.

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