

US OPENS OLYMPIC GAMES WITH MERCY RULE VICTORY OVER ITALY

Aug. 14, 2004, 10:41 a.m. (ET)

Athens, GREECE --- With extremely hot and humid weather conditions, the two-time defending gold medalist USA squad opened the 2004 Olympic Games in grand fashion lighting the scoreboard with a 7-0 five inning mercy rule win over Italy. Led by a 4-for-4 effort with two RBI from Natasha Watley (Irvine, CA), the U.S. moved to 1-0 in competition while pitcher Jennie Finch (La Mirada, CA) garnered her first ever Olympic victory.

“The team was picked in September and it was so awesome to finally put it all together out there,” said Jessica Mendoza. “We were reading our initial quotes from September when we were named to the team and I was quoted as saying ‘I couldn’t even imagine taking the field with USA on my chest and now it is a reality.’ It has been a long process and an amazing ride. I am so excited to finally be here and playing at the Olympic Games.”

Her first ever Olympic at bat, speedster Watley led off the first inning with her trademark infield base hit before a fielding error from Italian third baseman Natalie Anter allowed Leah O’Brien-Amico (Chino Hills, CA) to advance on a sacrifice bunt putting two runners on board. Two-time gold medalist Lisa Fernandez (Long Beach, CA) then drove an RBI base hit to right field to plate Watley for the 1-0 lead.

The U.S offense continued to connect in the second after Kelly Kretschman (Indian Harbour Beach, FL) drove a 3-2 pitch to left center for a stand-up double. Lefty Jessica Mendoza (Camarillo, CA) then rocked a triple to the right field gap to score Kretschman for the 2-0 jump. With no outs, the Red, White and Blue continued with its offensive onslaught with an RBI base hit from No. 9 hitter Laura Berg (Santa Fe Springs, CA) to lift the U.S. to a 3-0 lead. Batting around in the order, Watley added another infield single before a ground out RBI from Crystl Bustos (Canyon Country, CA) plated Berg for the final run of the inning.

The arm of right-handed pitching sensation Finch stifled the Italian hitters through the first three innings as she allowed no hits and retired five hitters via the strikeout. The U.S. entered left-handed pitcher Lori Harrigan (Las Vegas, NV) in the top of the fourth inning. A shaky start allowing two hits out of the gate, Harrigan soon settled down ending the inning with two strikeouts.

Silent bats through the third and fourth, Cat Osterman (Houston, TX) entered in the circle for the U.S. in the top half of fifth after a walk and base hit off Harrigan followed by a passed ball put runners on second and third. It was all Osterman however, in relief as she shutdown Italy with back-to-back strikeouts to end the inning.

Jung led off the bottom of the fifth for the U.S. with a double to right field and Kretschman singled through the right side to put runners on the corners. Mendoza came through once again with an RBI single up the middle to score Jung before the explosive Watley blasted a two run triple to centerfield to give the U.S. the final 7-0 victory.

“I have been working with Coach Candrea to improve on my power game,” Watley said. “I am trying to get it out of the infield and into the alley ways. I need to be more than one dimensional. It definitely opens up my game a little bit more.”

Up next for the U.S. will be the highly noted rivalry between the U.S. and Australia. Both 1-0 in competition after a 4-2 Australian victory against Japan, the two teams will meet at 5 p.m. (Greece time) on August 15.

A PRESIDENTIAL VISIT -Prior to the game, the U.S. team had a special visit from former U.S. President George Bush, former first lady Barbara Bush, and their grandchildren Jenna and Barbara. Former President Bush opened the Olympic softball competition by throwing out the ceremonial first pitch in game one. An exchange of greetings and good luck wishes, the Team USA took a few photos and graciously thanked the family for their visit.

ROOKIE OUTING- Of the 11 total U.S. hits, nine came from first time Olympians in their first ever Olympic competition. Watley led with four followed by Kretschman and Mendoza with two a piece and Jung with one. To add, Finch, a first time Olympian, was awarded the win tossing three complete innings allowing no hits and five strikeouts.

SHUTOUT-With its 7-0 shutout victory over Italy in game one of the 2004 Olympics, the U.S. has now posted 11 shutouts in Olympic competition.

HOME AGAIN-During the Olympic technical meeting on Friday, the U.S. won six of the seven coin flips to garner home team status. The only game in which the U.S. will serve as the visitor will be versus Japan.

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