

EMOTIONAL RIDE TO US SOFTBALL GOLD

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By STEVE WILSTEIN, AP Sports Columnist

ATHENS, Greece (AP) -- Some home runs make a statement. The one Crystl Bustos sent flying onto an old airport runway was the stuff of legend.

The bright yellow softball rose on a high arc over the left-field wall, soared beyond the grass embankment and over a hedge of bushes. It came down at last on the vast abandoned tarmac, some 330 or 350 or 400 feet from the plate, and kept going.

Call it Olympian, Ruthian, Bustosian -- the longest shot in Olympic softball history, longer than her two-run homer to center in the first inning. The mammoth drive in the third defined the power of a U.S. team that is, by far, the best the sport has ever known.

The American women who won gold medals Monday, beating Australia 5-1 in the final, are so dominant in hitting, pitching, fielding that there are worries they're too good for the sport. Baloney!

Let the rest of the world catch up, just as it did in basketball a dozen years after the original Dream Team showed how magical a game of hoops could be. The Soviets once ruled hockey this way, until a miracle in Lake Placid came along and other countries built contenders, too.

This U.S. softball team was everything any Olympic team strives to be -- as close to perfection as possible on the field and as close in spirit as it could get away from the diamond.

The numbers are staggering.

Lisa Fernandez's four-hitter in the final was her fourth victory of the games. The one run Australia scored was the only earned run she gave up the whole tournament. The Americans outscored the field 51-1 over nine games and set more than a dozen records, including the five homers Bustos hit.

They ran their winning streak to 79 games, losing the last time only to their "B" team a year ago. There's still room to improve in that regard, since they had a 112-game winning streak snapped by Japan in Sydney.

Yet these women are more than the sum of their incredible statistics. They grew together as teammates and friends, learned to lean on each other in life's difficult moments, drew strength from the family deaths that weighed so heavily on them and their coach, Mike Candrea.

Four years ago Bustos, so strong physically, was shattered when she learned the grandfather who helped raise her died unexpectedly after the third game in Sydney -- the game that Japan won.

Bustos had hit three homers to that point in the tourney, then, understandably, tailed off as the U.S. team struggled to win the gold.

Her mind was at ease in these Olympics, her swings ferocious, though she acknowledged, "this time will always bring back memories" of the sadness in Sydney. Just as her teammates comforted her then, they were all a source of support and strength for Candrea. It has been an emotionally wrenching five weeks since his wife of 28 years, Sue, died suddenly of a brain aneurysm after giving up her job as an accountant to travel with him and the team on a pre-Olympic tour. Candrea, whose anniversary with Sue was Aug. 7, rubbed his wedding ring throughout the game Monday.

"I had a dream last night," he said, forcing a smile even as he fought back tears. "I hadn't had a dream in a long time. She wanted me to chill out. That was Sue." He said the team gave him the courage to go on, to pursue the dream he and his wife shared.

"To me, courage doesn't mean that you're brave," he said. "Courage is something that allows you to get through tough times. I told this team from day one that they could be special athletes. They proved to me they're not only special athletes but special people."

Fernandez's eyes welled up and her voice cracked as she spoke about the effect Sue Candrea's death had on the team, how it taught everyone to cherish the precious moments in life and to lean on each other for help.

"This team has a bond that will always be there," she said. "We'll always be a part of each other's life."

She spoke haltingly, trying not to break down -- all this just moments after a deliriously happy celebration on the field, the whole team sprawled on the diamond, hugging each other and flinging hats and gloves in the air.

"The only way I could help him get through it was to at least bring home the gold," Fernandez said. "Because that was the one thing he was going to have to get him through this time." She said Candrea kept telling them not to win the gold for him, but to win it for their country and themselves.

"That's the kind of man he is," she said. "Coach Candrea never allowed his emotions

to show. He stood strong for us. This team got it done, and we got it done in grand fashion. This is the best that's ever put on the red, white and blue."

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