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World-Class Athlete: Do You Have What It Takes?

By Leah Lauber

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The following excerpt comes from the book, Soccer Dreams, (a top-seller in sports journalism at Amazon) which describes Leah Lauber's true adventure following the U.S. Women's National Soccer Team, as a fan and 12-year old Junior Reporter during the history-making 1999 Women's World Cup. While the article is now dated and was written primarily for children, the lesson itself is timeless in describing what it takes to be a world-class athlete.

Do you have what it takes to be a world-class athlete? Do you know what it takes? Well, if you don't know, keep reading!

I attended the U.S. Women's National Soccer Team training session at the Seminole Sports Training Center near Orlando, Florida recently while the team was preparing for the Women's World Cup, which began Saturday and runs through July 10.

The United States Women's National Team is a great team. In 1998, their record was 22-1-2, losing only to Norway. The U.S. team won the Women's World Cup in '91, came in third in '95, and won the '96 gold medal in the first-ever Olympic soccer competition for women.

When we arrived at the field, the team was already warming up and stretching. They were working on individual skills like juggling, volleys, and heading.

Then they played small-sided games like 4 vs. 2, playing to maintain possession of the ball. The purpose was to transition to defense as fast as possible once a player lost the ball.

Next, they worked on the fine art of "finishing," or scoring goals. They worked on several ways to attack the goal from different angles.

World-Class Athlete: Do You Have What It Takes?

What impressed me most was that the best women's team in the world was practicing so hard! After practice I spoke to a few of the players.

"We know every other team is playing their best when they face us, so we have to be as good as we can be," said defender Brandi Chastain.

Goalie Briana Scurry added, "You have to work hard to stay the best."

"In order to achieve your goals and get where you want to be, you have to continue to practice," said forward Danielle Fotopoulos. "I always practice year-round with a club team or doing whatever I can to improve myself."

When the players were younger, they sometimes had to miss parties, dances, and sleepovers, just so they could play soccer. Most of us would consider those sacrifices, but they don't, they chose to play for their love of the game.

The rewards are great for these world-class athletes: traveling around the world as a team, getting paid to play and competing in the Olympics.

"That was a dream come true for me," Scurry said about winning the gold medal in the 1996 Olympics.

"I had been dreaming about being in the Olympics since I was really young, so it was an incredible feeling for me. My family was there, my friends were there, we won it at home (in Atlanta), so it was just the most unbelievable experience."

What's the best thing about being on the National Team? "I get to play the sport that I love everyday with my best friends," Chastain said.

"The relationships and friendships, we're just a big family here," said Scurry, "I can count on the team for anything."

Though they do take their sport seriously, it's not just work, work, work all the time for this team. During a water break, team members were laughing, joking and throwing water on each other. When the coaches called them to resume, it was instantly back to work. When practice finished, the players still had to attend a team meeting and work out with weights.

"We try to work hard some days and other days it's easy. It's not hard work every single day. It's a high level of concentration every day, but not physically hard, because we'd just wear the team out," Coach Tony DiCicco said later. "It wouldn't be fun to play and it's gotta be fun to play."

Of course, the fun part of soccer is playing the game, executing what you've practiced and defeating your opponents.

The next day the team took on Brazil in an exhibition game.

World-Class Athlete: Do You Have What It Takes?

I had passes that allowed me to be on the field during the game to shoot photos and to interview the players after the game (The other photographers there looked at me as if I was just tagging along with my dad, but really, my dad was tagging along with me!

At that time, Mia Hamm had already tied the record for most international career goals at 107. The players, the media, and more than 10,000 fans, were expecting her to break the record that night. She had an opportunity to do so early in the game, but the goalie saved it. Right at the end of the first half, Mia shot and scored the record-breaking goal. I was standing 15 feet away from her! AWESOME!!! After the referee blew the whistle for halftime, Mia was interviewed by ESPN. As she was going into the locker room, I stuck my hand out and she slapped me a high-five!

During the second half, the U.S. scored two more goals. The last goal was a set play exactly the way they practiced the day before: one player crossed it from the left side over the goalie to another teammate who headed it back to the middle, where Tiffeny Milbrett converted the easy shot from five yards out. That's what practicing is all about!

After the 3-0 win over Brazil, I was with a pack of reporters and used my tape recorder to capture Mia Hamm's comments about her record-setting 108th goal.

"It was a great ball coming from Cindy Parlow's one-touch pass. She touched it outside because I was running forward. I didn't touch it very well, and I thought I was leaning back, but I guess I hit it right through her legs, so I was lucky this one got through," she said.

"It means a lot to me right now, but it will probably mean even more once I stop playing and look back on my career. I just love the fact that I could be here and share it with my teammates – they're a big part of all these goals," Hamm said. "The fact that they all ran out on the field was awesome. They were telling me how proud they were of me."

She signed my Mia Hamm jersey, as well as my copy of her book, *Go for the Goal*. I also had a binder signed by most of the other players.

Coach Tony DiCicco was sitting on the stairs eating pizza so, between slices, I asked him to sign the binder too. I laughed when his assistant said, "Here's the head coach of the best women's team in the world, eating pizza on some stairs."

After he finished his late dinner, the coach talked about what makes a national team. "I look for players with character, players that I can trust when we're not together as a team, they're going to work hard even by themselves," he said. "I also look for players that have a special quality. Maybe they're fast, maybe they're leaders, maybe great headers on the ball, but they have to have a special quality. When you get all those qualities together, you can kind of piece the puzzle together."

So now you know what it takes to be a world-class athlete. If you want to become one, get to work!

Leah Lauber is the author of *Soccer Dreams*, which she wrote at the age of twelve to describe her true

World-Class Athlete: Do You Have What It Takes?

adventure following the U.S. Women's National Team as a fan and Junior Reporter during the 1999 Women's World Cup. She also wrote Soccer Dreams to promote the positive values she learned from the team and to encourage readers to dream BIG! Leah and a number of partners are offering multiple free bonuses for buyers of her book at Amazon.

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