

WATER POLO WOMEN

Photo: GETTY IMAGES - FREDERICK M. BROWN



Giusy MALATO (ITA)
15.40%



Danielle de BRUIJN (NED)
13.50%



Tania di MARIO (ITA)
13.50%

The best of the decade:
Brenda VILLA (USA)
28.80%

Also voted for:
Sofia Konukh (RUS)
Heather Petri (USA)
Mercedes Stieber (HUN)
Blanca Gil (ESP)

RESULTS, MEDALS

Besides winning the world titles with the US team in 2003, 2007 and 2009 (and runner-up in 2005) Brenda Villa usually finishes as the top scorer of her national side. Her Olympic medal tally consists of two silver and a bronze medal with the gold still to come. She also boasts four first-place finishes in the FINA World League and two Pan American titles and was among the winners, Orizzonte of Italy, of the most coveted European cup-titles, the Champions Cup, in 2006.

submissive to males. Although not voluminous, the research has linked playing organised sports to breaking out of the self-sinking aspect of that mind-set, resulting in increased academic success. Villa heartily agrees with these findings and credits much of her success to the spring-boarding attitudes of her parents. After Beijing she used her platform to encourage young people to make school a priority and take advantage of the rapid rise of scholarships available to athletes like her." ■

By Gergely CSURKA
Press Officer of the Hungarian Swimming Association

Photo: REUTERS - LASZLO BALOGH



American beauty... Villa is a role model for women athletes and a very successful player

Little hands, great successes

Her coach calls her “the Wayne Gretzky of women’s water polo“, though at 162,6cm Brenda Villa isn’t built like a prototypical player. When she stands alongside her teammates, her head is level with their shoulders. And yet, she is one of the best players in the world.

“The key to being a good water polo player is to have really long arms, and Brenda doesn’t,” John Tanner, her coach at Stanford, told the Los Angeles Times. “Another key is to have large hands, and she doesn’t. It also helps to be extremely fast in the water, and she’s reasonably fast.” Instead, Villa’s presence in the water – and her exceptional vision – transcends her physical limitations. Tanner notes that Villa has “an amazing feel for the game

and for what is going to happen next. She sees the whole pool at once – it’s almost like that all-encompassing IMAX view.”

Former national team head coach Guy Baker shared this view, stating: *“Brenda’s one of the best water polo players in the world. She’s our leader in the water because she makes great decisions. We want the ball in her hands.”* (Maybe it’s worth mentioning that during her high school years Brenda usually made appearances in the boy’s games and scored a handful of goals.)

She won all available titles at international level (three-time World Champion, World League-winner) – the only one to elude her and the excellent US team is the Olympic gold medal. When they lost to Australia in Sydney 2000, the silver lining was a place in history as runners-up at the very first Olympic tournament for women’s water polo (and she still picks the best moment of her career to score the winning goal against Hungary in the game which decided the qualification for the Sydney Games).

All of that said, it was painful for the US and Villa to have to settle for bronze in 2004, a year after winning the world title in Barcelona. And the same happened on

Photo: REUTERS

the follow-up occasion: the US arrived in Beijing as reigning World Champions but this time the Netherlands stole the show in the final – another silver for Villa&Co.

However, the engine of the US team cannot evade her destiny. She bears a tattoo of the five Olympic rings: a symbol of Villa’s will to become Olympic Champion. London is not far away and Brenda and the Americans proved to be invincible again at the World Championships in Rome last year.

Brenda is a genuine role model: a quality water polo player who committed herself to university studies for years (in 2002 she led the Stanford team to the NCAA Championships; was awarded the Peter J. Cutino Award as the top female college water polo player; graduated as the second leading scorer in school history with 172 goals) and later went to Italy to play professionally. In the off season she joined the team of Cerritos College as an assistant coach.

Here’s a heartening comment from womensports.com for Villa and water polo fans to contemplate: *“She seems unaware of the splash she has made as role model and hero to Latina athletes. Maybe she’s just too busy and too modest by nature. Researchers have referred to the “Maria Paradox,” which describes a cultural tendency of Latinas to be passive and*



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