USA Waterpolo Women's Team: “Making history has been a fortunate by-product of our values”

By Greg Mescall, Director of Communications, USA Water Polo

The eye-popping numbers were shared on a graphic on the USA Water Polo Instagram account:

- 59 straight victories
- A record of 99 wins and 2 losses
- 2 FINA World Championships
3 FINA World League crowns

1 Pan American Games gold medal

1 ticket to the 2020 Olympic Games
The honour comes after the latest World Championships, Pan Am Games gold, and Super Final crown. The Super Final title started off another podium-filled summer and more importantly confirmed the team’s spot in the Tokyo Olympics.

The results come from a truly collective effort.

“We aspire to play freely as one, which means emotionally, mentally, and physically,” captain Maggie Steffens said.

“This takes extra effort every day. This way, if we are able to achieve our dream and stand on the podium, we can smile together and feel pure joy from the way we played and the way we played for one another.”

Beside host Japan, Team USA was the first through the door to punch a ticket to Tokyo, and it was the main goal the team had set for 2019.

So, beyond earning an Olympic berth and earning gold, what was different about this year for Team USA? Another year as the number-one team in the world.

Adversity.

Team USA isn’t a stranger to adversity. While the results might look effortless from time to time, a lot of work was put in to reach those results. Typical full-time training for the United States features six days of practice a week with four double days, totalling somewhere around 35 hours a week working on water polo. The players also know that each time they hit the pool, they’re getting the very best from the opposition – a bullseye on their backs as a result of recent success. Not to mention the competition to make each and every roster. With most events featuring rosters of 13 – but the Pan American Games and Olympic Games moving to 11 – it’s more difficult than ever to grab a spot representing the red, white and blue.

However, all these things have been constants since well before 2016. What’s different is that in 2019 the adversity came
outside the pool. And in perhaps a predictable way, it has brought an already tight group just a little bit closer.

In the hours after winning their third straight FINA World Championships, the USA women celebrated in Gwangju with a team dinner and a trip to a nearby nightclub. There, as has been widely reported, tragedy struck. A second floor collapsed, killing two and injuring many others. Among those injured were Kaleigh Gilchrist and Paige Hauschild. The pair just hours before stood on the podium in the rain in Gwangju, smiling broadly as they each earned their second world championship title medals.

Life is fragile. Count your blessings

Gilchrist got the worst of it, suffering deep lacerations in her left leg that will require months of rehab, which is currently underway.

“Our trainer named my rehab ‘The Mamba Mission’, and my life right now is dedicated to it,” Gilchrist said. “We’ve been putting in a lot of hours, but that’s okay because I’ve found so much joy in this process. It’s pretty wild to see the progress happening every single day. Each day has its own challenges and triumphs, but that’s what keeps me going. That, and the people I’m fortunate enough to have on my team. My family, team-mates, community and rehab team have been the biggest blessing through this whole incident. I’m counting down the days until I’m back in the pool, playing beside the women I
While Gilchrist returned home from Korea after an extended stay at a Gwangju hospital, Hauschild prepared to head to Lima, Peru, for the Pan American Games where she was replaced on the roster as she recovered from her injury.

In the aftermath of Gwangju, the team members leaned on each other. There were constant check-ins with Gilchrist from her hospital bed and an army of supporters waiting to greet her at John Wayne Airport in Orange County, California, when she returned home.

The group that was used to delivering high-powered high fives and big hugs after big goals was now celebrating just seeing each other. As Head Coach Adam Krikorian tweeted not long afterwards, everyone felt the support for the team from the water polo community. “A heartfelt THANK YOU to those that cared for & kept our athletes safe. The resiliency & teamwork displayed within our team of people & waterpolo tight community was inspiring to watch in action. I pray for those that were less fortunate. Life is fragile. Count your blessings.”

It was this team that picked up Krikorian in the summer of 2016 when his brother Blake unexpectedly passed away before the start of the Olympic Games. Now he was watching them handle challenging times again with complete composure.
We focus on the training and the journey

While Gilchrist recovered at home, the USA women opened play at the Pan American Games and proceeded to thump every team they came up against. While their Olympic qualification had already been confirmed, Team USA has always taken great pride in the Pan Ams and still sent a top-level squad. But as they prepared for the gold medal final against Canada, calamity struck again as Alys Williams and Rachel Fattal came down with an illness, leaving them out of action for the title bout. On a team that prides itself on “next woman up”, in stepped Hauschild – who by this point had had her stitches removed.

With that, Hauschild and Team USA took apart Canada 24-4 as Gilchrist followed social media updates from Southern California. It was the end of an exhausting summer in more ways than one. Some two months travelling abroad to compete in high-level competitions – coupled with adversity that taxed the mind, body and spirit – Team USA came out the other side with more gold medals and more importantly a continued appreciation for each other.

Olympic athletes often discuss their journeys, much like goalkeeper Ashleigh Johnson at a recent awards dinner hosted by the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee. The medals will remain, the wins or losses are remembered, but the memories that often burn brightest are the moments spent together, working toward that common goal. Not always something particularly earth-shattering, but the little details that can be savoured only when hours and hours are spent in pursuit of the same goals…in this case, excellence.

“Our team doesn’t focus on the number of wins or a streak, we focus on the way we play and the way we represent ourselves and our country. We focus on the training and the journey, so we can be our best when the opportunity presents itself,” Steffens said. “This team is about playing as a team and for the team, working hard and working smart, and constantly striving to improve. Making history has been a fortunate by-product of our values which we are proud to
It's that focus on the team above everything else that has allowed this squad to succeed for so long, no matter what is put in their way.