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Golden Gwangju – water polo: Ashleigh Johnson (USA) Fantastic effort by everyone

Greg Mescall, FINA Magazine contributor (USA)

The 2019 FINA World Championships featured many emotions for the victorious USA women's water polo team. The return of key players, the joy of winning a title, the opportunity to advance their sport and their support of each other in the face of tragedy.

Ashleigh Johnson wasn't there in the summer of 2017 when they won their second straight world title in Budapest. She had taken time away from the national team after claiming gold at the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio and then finishing her collegiate career at Princeton University in the spring of 2017. With Johnson away, Team USA proved they were still the best in the world as they rumbled through the competition in Budapest.

While gold medals were certainly fun to win, Johnson found that she missed just about every aspect of being a part of Team USA. She told Karen Rosen of TeamUSA.org in early 2018:

“I missed the girls. I missed the competitive environment. Playing water polo here is like playing nowhere else. It's like a family – a really competitive family. When you're in it, you're lucky to be a part of it, and you realise that every day, because you get to be around these strong, amazing women.”

Johnson cited exhaustion, both mental and physical, as the reason she stepped away from the team.



The team in Budapest 2017 after winning gold

ADD BUDAPEST PHOTO

“This tournament’s long”

What’s the old saying? Absence makes the heart grow fonder. True in love and in water polo.

So, as the seconds ticked down on July 26 at the aquatic centre at Nambu University in Gwangju, it was Johnson at the centre of the celebration with Team USA. She had been lifted earlier in the match for Amanda Longan, another superb keeper in the USA stable, and was part of the jubilation as the bench spilled into the pool, eventually dragging head coach Adam Krikorian with them.

Team USA had won their 53rd successive match, considered a record in the modern era of men’s and women’s water polo, with an 11-6 win over longtime rival Spain. They had blitzed the competition once again on the world stage, racking up six wins in South Korea, including a 7-2 semi-final victory over Australia, one of their finest displays of defence in years. Johnson had won awards before at the world championships. She piloted the US to a 5-4 victory over the Netherlands in 2015 in Kazan to earn the first of these three straight titles. There she was named final match MVP and top goalkeeper. In Gwangju, she had a team-high 53 saves but inexplicably earned just final match MVP honours. They earned the ultimate prize, however, and they had a familiar face back in goal, alongside other dominant performers who have been so key to Team USA’s success.



Team USA in Gwangju 2019 after their victory with Ashleigh

From captain Maggie Steffens and centre Melissa Seidemann, both double Olympic gold medallists, to Maddie Musselman, who led the team in Gwangju with 13 goals scored, and fellow Rio Olympians Rachel Fattal, Kiley Neushul, Makenzie Fischer, Aria Fischer and Kaleigh Gilchrist it is no surprise a team with this success has such a solid core. Coach Krikorian referenced the challenges of world championships and how his team put it all together.

“This tournament’s long, I think people don’t realise that,” said Krikorian. “We started out pacing ourselves a bit, we just built some momentum and saved our best performance for our last two against Australia and in the final. Fantastic effort by everyone. (The final) was incredibly special, we had everyone but two players score. Just a full team effort and a phenomenal performance, especially defensively.”

“We feel like we are spokespeople for the sport of water polo”

As the USA women ran their win streak to an all-time high, with sights set on the Pan American Games in Lima just a few days later, they couldn’t help but think about the effect they have on women’s water polo in the United States and their place among the other successful women’s sports teams in America, including the recently crowned Women’s World Cup champions of USA Soccer.

“To say we don’t think about it would be a lie, we want to show people what we can do as a team, as a programme, as a collective staff,” Krikorian said. “We feel like we are spokespeople for the sport of water polo. When you have those feelings and there is a bigger purpose to this than just the selfish glory it is inspiring for us to continue this run, and hopefully we can, moving forward.”

As the team celebrated this milestone and the opportunity to advance the game, tragedy struck in Gwangju when the second floor of a nightclub collapsed, killing two South Koreans. In the accident athletes competing in the World Championships

suffered injuries, including four members of the USA squads. Johnny Hooper and Paige Hauschild both suffered lacerations that required stitches, while Ben Hallock had scrapes on his legs. The worst of the injuries for Team USA was suffered by Kaleigh Gilchrist. A deep left-leg laceration required surgery at a Gwangju hospital and an additional stay in South Korea. She returned home three days after her team-mates to a welcoming party at the Orange County airport in Southern California.

Like Johnson, Gilchrist had taken the summer of 2017 off from the national team. She was pursuing her other career as a professional surfer. It was a full-circle moment to have Gilchrist and Johnson back on a gold medal winning team at the World Championships. Both won gold in Kazan and then again at the Rio Olympics.

Now team-mates and the water polo world have rallied around Gilchrist and will continue to do so as she recuperates in her return to the pool and the team.

“This experience has been full of emotions from happiness and excitement to complete fear and shock, but if it has taught me one thing, it’s that life can change in an instant and it is so important to keep your loved ones close. I have so much gratitude for my family, friends, team-mates and the entire water polo community. Thank you, thank you, thank you to everyone that has helped me and will help me throughout this process. I am so fortunate to be coming home safe and am looking forward to this road to recovery,” said Gilchrist in an Instagram post as she returned home from Gwangju.

The moments in South Korea, whether happy or sad, have only served to further galvanise a group and bring them closer together on their quest to Tokyo. Their win streak marches on and so does their commitment to each other, in and out of the pool.
