

Americans take down unbeatable Cuban team

"This is something I'll never forget. This will last forever."

- Mike Neill, Olympic gold medalist -

by Geoff Grant
September 28, 2000
Knight-Ridder Tribune

SYDNEY, Australia - It was a mob. And it was on the move, a living, breathing, running mass of humanity headed straight for the mound and U.S. pitcher Ben Sheets.

Sheets - on his knees in celebration, arms outstretched - didn't budge, at once embracing the emotion, even as he was buried beneath scores of red, white and blue teammates.

But the mob didn't stop there, not for long anyway. It turned its exuberance to the edge of the infield where it devoured left fielder Mike Neill, consuming the night's second biggest star in one big happy pile of sweat and tears.

For the U.S. baseball team, Wednesday night's 4-0 victory was about more than winning a game. It was about making a name for itself on the world's biggest stage, for players whose pro careers have been shunted aside and for players whose pro careers are about to blossom.

It was also about beating Cuba, the unbeatable best, and about bringing home the gold medal in a sport America invented, but hadn't mastered.

"Everybody knew they (Cuba) were going to win," said manager Tommy Lasorda. "Everybody knew we didn't have a chance. Everybody knew that we didn't have a good team and that Major League Baseball didn't give us the players. I managed 20 years with the Dodgers, had a lot of great moments, but this is the greatest moment of my life, beating a team like the Cubans."

Cuba entered the gold-medal game as two-time champions, 25-1 in the three Olympics in which it has participated, unbeaten in four games vs. the United States. On the international level, the numbers were even more staggering. Cuba was 25-3 vs. Team USA and had won the past 19 World Championships.

But Cuba proved vulnerable. It's a team of aging veterans, thinned by players who defected for the lure of Major League cash. It had to play for the first time with wooden bats - "timber bats" as Cuban manager Servio Borges said - and it had to face the world's best for the first time, as the Games welcomed professionals.

For the U.S. squad, that meant a disparate collection of players from distant minor-league outposts, players like Sheets and Neill, who represent the team's yin and yang. There are 13 players younger than 25. Their futures look bright. There are 11 players older than 25. They don't have futures, at least not in the majors.

Sheets is 22, looks 17, and pitches like he's 30. And with his stuff, he'll be pitching in the big leagues at least that long. He's got a fastball that dances at 95 mph and a hard sinker that rarely finds the middle of a bat.

Lasorda has enjoyed portraying his team as a bunch of rag-tag underachievers, but make no mistake, Sheets is the real deal and was easily the best player Wednesday.

Cuba scratched out just three hits against Sheets, who struck out five, walked none and induced 16 groundouts. He was throwing in the mid-90s in the ninth. Sheets - a bonus baby and 1999 first-round draft pick of the Milwaukee Brewers - is already rich and could be pitching in the National League as early as next season.

Neill, however, is going nowhere. He's 30, stuck in the Seattle Mariners farm system and has all of 15 at-bats in the big leagues. His future was Wednesday. He homered in the first inning, giving the U.S. a lead it wouldn't relinquish. Neill was batting just .185 entering the night. As he touched home plate, he was met by the team, which cleared the dugout to congratulate him.

In the ninth inning, Neill made a diving catch of a ball slicing down the left-field line. It was the game's final out, touching off the wild celebration that engulfed both he and Sheets.

"This is something I'll never forget," Neill said. "This will last forever."

Jones advances in long jump, 200

by John Jeansonne
Newsday
September 27, 2000

SYDNEY, Australia - Just sharpening her pencil for the next test, Marion Jones went through a sort of rehearsal at 200 meters and a practice long jump Wednesday night and gave every impression she will ace her next final, Thursday's Olympic 200.

That would be her second gold medal of the Sydney Games, to go with last Saturday's 100-meter victory, as she seeks her grail of five golds by this weekend. And her return to the Olympic frying pan, following the fire of three strange days off, during which her husband was cited for positive steroid tests, somehow gave the impression of being rotely carefree.

With plenty of gasping also-rans straining to run the second round of the 200 in anything approaching 23 seconds, Jones didn't even need her higher gears to go 22.50. Then, more impressively, she took a single jump an hour later and easily exceeded the automatic 21-11 qualifying standard to put her into tomorrow's long jump final, going 22-3 in spite of stutter-stepping into her takeoff. The only other jumper to take care of qualifying business on her first jump was former world record-holder Heike Drechsler of Germany.

"As you know," Jones said, "I've had difficulty in the past with my qualifying jumps. To come out this evening and pop the qualifying jump on the first try, I'm pleased with that. After the jump, I was, like, 'What?' I turned around expecting a red flag (for a foul). But, no worries at all."

In spite of the doping charges against husband C.J. Hunter, who has denied guilt, Jones was in control and dominant as ever on the track and in the field. She slowed so drasti-

cally through the last 30 meters of the 200 that Australia's Melinda Gainsford-Taylor - whose personal best is .61 of a second (or about six meters) slower than Jones' - actually nipped Jones by .01 with a mighty charge in their heat. Of course, the only purpose was to finish in the top four and advance to Thursday's semifinal.

"I let up a bit too much in that one," Jones said, "but that's the easiest 22.5 I've ever run. I feel good. Everything else is pushed to the back of my head. It's all about racing; I'm fine now." Today she faces the 200 semis and, not quite two hours later, the 200 final.

Following Friday's long jump final, which appears a more dicey challenge, particularly due to the consistency this season of Italy's Fiona May, the competitive risks go up yet more for Jones with Saturday's 4x100 and 4x400 relays.

Meanwhile, Jones seemed supremely confident and at ease after Wednesday's quick, efficient work, which began eight hours after she had cruised through the first round of the 200 in 22.75.

"This morning, getting up, I just wanted to focus on my rounds in the 200 and the jump," she said. "All along, I said that I thought this was going to be my most difficult day. I had to juggle two rounds of the 200, even though it's not incredibly difficult to run 22.7 and 22.5. But, at the end of the day, I had to come back and get that qualifying mark in the long jump."

What might be daunting to virtually every other athlete in her situation was a joy to Jones. "This is where I love to be," she said. "I love to be out there in front of the fans, in front of the lights. It kind of gets my mind off everything. There is so much going on right now, which we'll all deal with once the Sydney Games are done. But this is what I love to do. And it was a good day overall."

Norway shocks U.S.



The U.S. women's soccer team staves off upset with the tying goal in the waning minutes of Thursday's final, but Norway scores in OT to shock the Americans 3-2 and win Olympic gold.

Williams sisters grab gold...with help from King

by Bill Dwyre
Los Angeles Times
September 28, 2000

SYDNEY, Australia - This being the Olympics, it was nice to see a torch being passed here Thursday.

When sisters Venus and Serena Williams won the women's doubles tennis gold medal, keeping intact a U.S. monopoly on the event, they accepted, at least figuratively, a major role in the future of the women's game from one of the greats of the past. Their coach here was the fabled Billie Jean King, owner of 12 Grand Slam event titles in singles, 15 in women's doubles and 11 in mixed. She came from the public courts of Long Beach, Calif., and set the tennis world on its ear for more than 20 years, starting in the early 1960s.

And while she is best remembered by the general public for knocking back Bobby Riggs in the Battle of the Sexes in the Astrodome in 1973, she has become deeply dedicated, as Olympic and Fed Cup captain, to ensuring a U.S. tennis future by sharing her part in a U.S. tennis past.

The Williams sisters spent two weeks here, learning the game and its history from King and her assistant, Zina Garrison. There were doubles drills and more doubles drills. And there were many questions from King about history.

"That's how I teach," King said. "I ask questions."

It wasn't as if Venus and Serena Williams needed instruction on the Continental grip. That was evident in their 6-1, 6-1 shellacking of Kristie Boogart and Miriam Oremans of the Netherlands in the gold medal match. The first set took 20 minutes, the second 29.

The legacy of U.S. women's Olympic doubles, inherited here by the Williamses, restarted when tennis returned to the Olympics in 1988 in Seoul and Pam Shriver and Garrison outlasted Czechs Jana Novotna and Helene Sukova, 4-6, 6-2, 10-8. The difference in drama between that one and Thursday's was night and day. Shriver and Garrison battled every point, every inch, before prevailing, and Shriver would remember, years later, "We just couldn't get Novotna to miss."

Mary Joe Fernandez and Gigi Fernandez, not related, had a similar struggle in Barcelona in 1992, finally getting past Arantxa Sanchez Vicario and Conchita Martinez, 7-5, 2-6, 6-2, and had no waltz in

Atlanta in 1996 when they beat Novotna and Sukova, 7-6, 6-4.

The Williams sisters, who have won 33 of their last 34 doubles matches, now have taken titles in four of the last five major events they have entered: the 1999 French Open, '99 U.S. Open, 2000 Wimbledon and now the Olympics. They got as far as the semifinals of this year's U.S. Open, but Venus pulled out of the doubles with a slight injury that allowed her to rest for the singles title she eventually won. It is seldom a struggle for them. They lost only one set here.

But as happy as King was about the doubles gold medal, as well as Venus' gold in singles and Monica Seles' bronze in singles - and the prospect of Lindsay Davenport healing up soon and rejoining the American team - she was even happier about the amount of time she had here to coach and teach.

"It was great to have them here, to be able to spend this much time," she said. "We were able to work on a lot of things. Venus' serve, if you can imagine, needed some work. She was getting in trouble when she turned her head a certain way."

"And we really worked on their doubles, on their volleys and their court movement." The Williamses acknowledged that afterward.

"We worked on moving like a team," Venus said, "and one time, when we had a point where we did that, moved like a team, and we got the point, we looked up there in the stands at our coaches. Kind of like, 'Hey, it works.'"

Something else obviously worked during the tutelage of King and Garrison - the history lessons.

With her doubles victory, Venus Williams became the first U.S. woman since Helen Wills in 1924 in Paris to win a singles and doubles gold medal in the Olympics. Venus Williams was asked if she knew who Wills was.

"Yes, I do," she said, smiling like somebody who had prepared for the test question. "I know that she played with a real steely look on her face," Venus said.

King was quick to acknowledge that Venus and Serena have been coached all along by their parents, Richard and Oracene Williams. But left unsaid was the reality that neither has experienced in tennis what King has. She's been there, done that, and is eager to keep the U.S. women's tennis flame burning brightly.

'Tis the Olympic spirit.

Total Medal Counts

	S	B	T	
	G	I	O	
	O	L	N	
	L	V	Z	
	D	R	E	
			A	
			L	
United States	32	18	26	76
Russia	19	18	21	58
China	26	15	15	56
Australia	15	22	14	51
Germany	9	12	20	41
France	12	13	8	33
Italy	11	6	11	28
Korea	6	8	9	23
Britain	6	9	5	20
Romania	10	4	4	18
Netherlands	8	7	3	18
Ukraine	3	7	7	17
Japan	5	7	4	16
Cuba	5	8	2	15
Belarus	3	1	10	14
Bulgaria	5	3	2	10
Greece	4	5	1	10
Poland	4	4	1	9
Canada	2	2	5	9
Switzerland	1	6	2	9
Sweden	4	3	1	8
Spain	3	1	4	8
Czech Republic	2	2	3	7
Brazil	0	4	3	7
Hungary	3	2	1	6
Indonesia	1	3	2	6
Slovakia	1	3	1	5
Belgium	0	2	3	5
Chinese Taipei	0	1	4	5
Turkey	3	0	1	4
Finland	2	1	1	4
Lithuania	2	0	2	4
Norway	1	2	1	4
New Zealand	1	0	3	4
Denmark	0	3	1	4
Jamaica	0	2	2	4
South Africa	0	1	3	4
Georgia	0	0	4	4
Austria	2	1	0	3
Iran	2	0	1	3
Mexico	1	2	0	3
Estonia	1	0	2	3
Ethiopia	1	0	2	3
North Korea	0	1	2	3
Slovenia	2	0	0	2
Kazakhstan	1	1	0	2
Croatia	1	0	1	2
Latvia	1	0	1	2
Nigeria	0	2	0	2
Trinidad & Tobago	0	1	1	2
Argentina	0	1	1	2
Kenya	0	1	1	2
Costa Rica	0	0	2	2
Armenia	0	0	2	2
Algeria	0	0	2	2
Colombia	1	0	0	1
Azerbaijan	1	0	0	1
Mozambique	1	0	0	1
Yugoslavia	0	1	0	1
Uruguay	0	1	0	1
Moldova	0	1	0	1
Ireland	0	1	0	1
Saudi Arabia	0	1	0	1
Bahamas	0	1	0	1
Vietnam	0	1	0	1
Kyrgyzstan	0	0	1	1
Thailand	0	0	1	1
Portugal	0	0	1	1
India	0	0	1	1
Kuwait	0	0	1	1
Barbados	0	0	1	1
Iceland	0	0	1	1
Qatar	0	0	1	1
Morocco	0	0	1	1
Sri Lanka	0	0	1	1

Olympic Moment of the Week

American Rulon Gardner won his first Olympic Gold Medal in Greco-Roman Wrestling by defeating Russian Aleksandr Karelin on Wednesday.

Karelin, who is known as "The World's Meanest Man," had never lost in international competition, and has not lost at all since 1987.

Gardner was competing in his first Olympics when he beat Karelin, who was heavily favored in the match. Karelin was attempting to win his fourth consecutive Olympic Gold Medal.

The Russian was a rival of the Soviet Team at the 1980 Winter Games.