



Bronze more than consolation prize for U.S.

Instead of sulking after loss to Sweden, American women bring honor

COMMENTARY

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TURIN, Italy - They lost a game no one thought they'd lose, but the U.S. women's hockey team didn't lose its pride. So don't tell them that the bronze medals they are taking home are some sort of consolation prize, something that you'd find in a box of Cracker Jack.

"We are obviously very excited to be bringing home a medal for the United States," defenseman Angela Ruggiero said after she and her teammates won the bronze medal with an impressive 4-0 victory over Finland. "I'm really proud of our team."

Ruggiero was speaking for herself, but her teammates echoed her sentiments. Sure, they had come hoping to play Canada for the gold, just as they had in the previous two Olympics. But they lost a shootout in the semifinals to Sweden on a night when no American could put the puck in the net. It was the Swedes' Miracle on Ice. It was the American women's worst night ever.

They could have given up right there, could have slunk into their rooms, crawled under the covers and stayed there until spring. Other teams in similar situations have done the same, barely bothering to show up for the medal they didn't want.

But it was also the only medal available to them, and just because it isn't gold or silver doesn't make it not worth winning.

If there is something called an Olympic spirit that has somehow survived today's win-or-else attitude toward sports, this group embodies it. If it really is about playing your best and taking pride in that, this was the game that showed it.

"You have a job to do," team captain Krissy Wendell said. "There are only three medals offered here, and we got one of them."

There were no tears, as there had been two nights earlier when they lost to Sweden. There also weren't half as many members of the U.S. media on hand to chronicle the occasion as there had been when the team lost to Sweden. That shows you how we've lost our sense of what the Olympics are about.

Americans should be as proud of this team as they are of themselves. They still hurt because they didn't play for the gold. That, said Wendell, will never go away. But you can be hurt without quitting, you can still do the best you can, even if the folks back home don't care as much any more as they did two days earlier.

"I'm just happy we ended it with a win," said forward Katie King, who scored a hat trick in this team's last game and her final game — ever. "We wanted to focus on coming home with a medal, and that's what we did."

King should have been on the ice when the clock finally expired, but she was in the penalty box instead. Less than a minute earlier, during a scrum in front of the opposing goal, a Finnish player started pushing one of King's teammates around, and King took exception, delivering a cross check after the whistle that would have passed muster in the NHL.

Much was made before and during the tournament about the absence of the team's original star and unquestioned leader, Cammi Granato, who was cut at the age of 34 in August because, she was told, the team needed to get younger. And the team could have used Granato's playmaking and leadership. Some of her teammates had questioned the move when it happened, but once they got here, they stood up for each other, as King did Monday.

They put a lot of time and effort into preparing for these Games. The only time their game gets noticed is during the Olympics. They had won gold in Nagano in the first women's tournament, then took silver in Salt Lake City. Now they have bronze.

It wasn't what they wanted, but it was the best they could do playing as hard as they could.

"I have no regrets," Wendell said. "We did all the preparation, put in all the work. The big thing is that women's hockey is growing in the United States and getting better."

Wendell is one of the pioneers of a sport that still has an uncertain future. It is guaranteed a spot in the Olympics only through the 2010 Games in Vancouver. After that, it will stay if it proves to be a crowd-pleasing, competitive sport.

This year's Games proved it's competitive the moment the Swedish team beat the United States, which, along with Canada, had been helmet and shoulder pads ahead of the rest of the world. The American players could appreciate the significance of their loss to Sweden to the future of their game. And they knew that sooner or later someone else would make the final. They just didn't want it to be them, didn't want it to be now.

But they didn't whine about it, choosing instead to go out with pride. They won a medal, not a consolation prize. They represented their country the best they could.

And now they go back to their real lives, some in real jobs, others back to college. As the players talked with the media after the game, veteran forward Jenny Potter was joined by her 5-year-old daughter, Madison. The girl's face was painted for the game, but she was otherwise oblivious to the difference between gold and bronze, happy just to be with her mom, who has spent so much time playing for her sport and her country.

"We wanted to come out and show what a special team we are," goalie Chanda Gunn said. "I think we did that."

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