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Inside Scoop™

by Mel Greenberg

TEMPLE TO TEMPLE – DAWN STALEY SPEAKS

The Olympics are over and the WNBA returns for its own special sprint to the end of the regular season as teams battle for four playoff berths in each conference. Perhaps, it's wise to wait a few days for some games to be played before looking ahead, so we'll be back with the forecast early next week. However, as a special Olympic present, Dawn Staley, the golden girl of the gold medal USA Women's Basketball team, made a quick one day return home to Philadelphia on the way back from Athens to the Charlotte Sting. Van Chancellor, coach of the Houston Comets and the Olympians, said on the phone the other night, "We don't win a gold medal without her."

The main reason Staley was in town was to welcome the Temple University women's basketball team she coaches in the winter back to school. Staley, who carried the flag for the entire United States Olympic delegation at the opening ceremonies, spent time on Monday with local reporters in the City of Brotherly Love.

Since the first of the month is exclusive time for TEAM REAL SPORTS, a special transcript covering the entire breath, well beyond the one-liners, of Staley's comments was made for our readers.

*Honor of carrying the flag

What were the emotions over carrying the flag?

It was tremendous. I don't know if you're familiar with the process. Team captains get together for a team captains meeting. In this meeting, you nominate different people to bear the flag. My teammates wanted me to nominate myself. Usually you nominate someone who's not there. I felt a little pressure to get up and speak about myself and I did that.

I spoke about being a coach here at Temple. I spoke about the community service. I spoke about the success I had at other Olympics and it was a process of elimination. There were about 14 or 15 other people nominated. They cut it down to five. They cut it down to three. And then, you know, in the end I was the last one standing.

Inside Scoop™

by Mel Greenberg

I was really proud. I didn't know it could happen. I didn't know people saw me for any other than playing basketball. But certainly they took the fact that I did do a lot of community service and have a positive influence in the community, that's the thing that put me over the top.

How did this team evolve?

Those teams are always special. That atmosphere is so selfless because we play basketball for pride. We don't play. There's not very much money involved with the Olympic team. You just play for the pride of your country. You play for the passion you have for your sport. And a lot of times for me it produces gold medals and that's why I continue to go back and play.

With our women, it's special in its own right. Because it's my last one, it was an opportunity to embrace the entire Olympics. I did things that I didn't do in prior Olympics. I asked people for autographs. I asked to take pictures with people. That was somewhat out of character for me. But I wanted to enjoy the journey and not just the basketball part of it. I focused on the basketball part because I've been there before. I know the expectations, but certainly I wanted to

get out and enjoy the other athletes in their quest to become gold medalists.

What was it like having that core group?

We had a great mix of experience and inexperience. The bottom line is the talent that was put together for that time, certainly we couldn't have accomplished the gold with just younger talent. Certainly our older players, myself, Sheryl Swoopes, Lisa Leslie, all played integral roles in us being gold medalists, integral roles in ensuring USA Basketball was going to be OK in the future. That was part of the reasons why I continue to play USA Basketball, is to lend that experience, lend that knowledge I have in competing for gold medals in the Olympics.

Talk about the (lack of chemistry) with the men's team.

Let me just preface that. They asked a lot of guys to participate in the Olympics, a lot of them. A lot of them turned them down. So they took the next best players they could get. Unfortunately, none of them were just pure shooters.

You have to have someone who understands international play.

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Especially on the NBA side, especially because they play a different style. They open the floor a lot. They drive and they kick. And NBA guys are used to defending smaller areas on the court and it took time. I thought they got better as the Olympics went on. If the Olympics were, maybe, three or four more days and the competition, I believe they would have come home with gold, because they made the adjustment at the tournament, but it was just a little bit too late.

How do the way teams are put together for the men need to be changed?

USA Basketball has to have a different strategy when it comes to the men. You know, the competition is a lot better. You can't really take them for granted. And you also have to understand, Argentina, Italy, they have very little players who play in the NBA.

They have aspirations. But for our guys, the NBA is their dream. For Argentina, Italy, China, the Olympics is their stage where they play the best basketball for their countries.

It's different for the NBA. It's not to say they don't play with pride, but certainly

you need a little more preparations for teams who play year round for their countries.

Being from Philadelphia, how much does that play in motivation playing for your country?

It always plays a part for me. growing up here in North Philadelphia. And the part that it plays is you always want to lend hope to someone who grew up in the same humble beginnings I've grown up in, to share your experience and, hopefully, it can be through sports, academics or what have you, for them to achieve Olympic type success no matter what profession they go into to.

So, yes, I do it for my neighborhood, I grew up in, but also, I do it for little kids who grow up in Spain, or Italy, or Argentina who grew up in humble beginnings.

What's going through your mind after winning the gold medal?

I'm actually just sharing that moment with that person who's putting the gold medal around my neck. Because if it wasn't for that person, that's what



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you aspire to, that's what you work hard for, so you can bend over, you know, a couple of my teammates who haven't been in that situation asked me, 'How do I bend over? Do I lean?' You get it anyway you can. It's important people understand, you're receiving it, people understand at the end of it, the USA flag is being raised, it's a very patriotic thing. It's cool. It's one of the most exhilarating things you could experience.

What did you reflect on the plane ride back?

Considering that the plane ride was after everybody stayed up all night, partying, the plane ride was kind of quiet and tranquil. But we did get an opportunity to talk to different people, some people that didn't receive medals, the people who make it happen behind the scenes. That's always great that as athletes we can relate as to who really makes it possible for us to compete and to play as free as possible.

For me, the assistant executive director of USA Basketball, Carol Callan, she is someone who I'm forever indebted to, because a lot of

things that go on behind the scenes, we don't know as players. She shares some things with me because I'm one of the older players. If some of the younger players knew what went on behind the scenes, they wouldn't be ready to play a lot of times. You get to share different stories and different perspectives of how people see things.

What did your mom say?

My mom tries to get greedy. I gave her the first one. She wants two out of three. But she's proud. She's very proud to share in this moment. For her, she's my constant. She's always supportive. Even when there are times I was injured, coming out of surgery, didn't know whether I was going to play again or not, she's always been there for me, and certainly she'll get a piece of it. She can't get the whole thing.

Talk about your dream to coach in USA Basketball?

Certainly. Anytime that you play basketball at the very top, you want to keep going back in any capacity that you can. I think coaching here at Temple has



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by Mel Greenberg

given me aspirations to go on and coach a time like that. As just a player, I didn't have aspirations to coaching the Olympic team because I never really wanted to be a coach, but now that I'm a coaching, I see the influence you can have on lives. Just playing basketball, you can teach life lessons at different ages, here in college, I play with grown women, but still they're always eager to learn and get better.

That's kind of what my passion is. To help people be the best they can be.

Does winning put away doubters growing up?

Not growing up, but doubters in our competition (at the Olympics). Australia talked for two weeks about playing us for the gold medal. They wanted the stage set to for them to upend our success at the Olympics. Quite frankly I was tired of hearing it. I was glad we were able to play them in the finals and kind of show them we're still the best, although they're getting closer.

Do you think more young women now see Olympic basketball as the pinnacle for them?

I don't think so. The fact there is a women's professional league has really opened eyes up and given little girls opportunities to dream and have their dreams realized. Anytime you're very successful (playing in the Olympics) doing that, it adds to that. It adds to realizing their dreams.

With the success of a lot of the women's teams, softball, water polo, volleyball, soccer, I think for those sports, yes, it will open the eyes for those who play those other sports.

We have a professional league that exists and the Olympic experience adds to that.

Talk about what Diana Taurasi adds.

She's probably the quickest rookie in getting food for the veterans, that's one. She's just a tremendous basketball mind. She's very talented. She understands the game. It really comes natural and easy to her. She is someone who will be an



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by Mel Greenberg

Olympian for a very long time. She could probably get three or four Olympics in with her talent.

How does not playing any more in the Olympics free up time in recruiting?

The Olympics usually occur in the summer. It's not really in July, during the time when there's a lot of recruiting going on. It's kind of the down time in August (when the games are played). It really won't free up a lot of time now that I'm still playing in the WNBA.

What was it like the first time or any time wearing the gold medal around your neck?

The first one, I didn't take it off until the next day after we traveled. It's really special, and not because you win your competition. It's the camaraderie. It's the friendships. It's the togetherness and sense of accomplishment for everybody. It's cool.

Did you see any problems in Athens?

Everything seemed great. A couple of fans in the stadium at the top, said some

of the stadium wasn't complete. But, fortunately, there was no rain. But I felt the conditions were like any other Olympics.

What was it like playing against Athena (Christoforakis), your former player on the Greek team?

Playing against Athena was tremendous. She didn't get to play a whole lot of minutes. But she did on the court when we played. She tried to post me up a little bit. I actually tried to get her to shoot the ball. One of her teammates passed the ball to her and I told her to shoot it, because I knew she wasn't going to get many opportunities to shoot it. But of course, she did like she did when she was here at Temple, she ignored me.

How will your medal impact your upcoming year?

Well, I hope it helps with recruiting. The fact that I won a gold medal, it will help when you go into people's homes and you tell them you want their daughters to experience something like this and certainly I have the experience to lend to them here at Temple as well as abroad. So I'll share that in recruiting stories.

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Mentally, what's trickier?. Coming out of the WNBA season into the Olympics, or going from the Olympics back to the WNBA season?

This one's a little bit harder. Going back after winning the gold medal, it's harder to get yourself up. Usually, when we're done with the Olympics, I'm done with basketball, so my body and my mind takes on something else. But I have to keep it up. I have to keep it in the player's mentality or else it will shut down on me. It's difficult, but as soon as practice starts, I'll get back into the swing of things.

How challenging is it if your WNBA team (Charlotte Sting) goes into October in the playoffs and finishes just before practice starts at Temple?

It is going to be challenging. But it is good challenge. It's a challenge in that if we're able to go to all the ways the finals, which would end October 12th, practice is just around the corner. But for us (her Temple staff), we're organized. We're ready. Our kids are ready to jump in and get into Olympic shape. But there shouldn't be any conflicts.

Did you see any players over there you'd like to bring over here?

Quite a few. Quite a few on our USA team. I didn't do any recruiting there. Usually the players that are playing in the Olympics are professionals and they can't really come here and play and get a scholarship to play here in the States.

What was (Rutgers coach C. Vivian) Stringer like to play for?

Coach Stringer was great. Coach Stringer was instrumental in our preparations for all the games. She did all the scouting reports. It was hard to get a word in with coach (Van) Chancellor, but she always seemed to get her words in to prepare us for whatever competition we faced.

Now that you are coaching, do you pay more attention to what the coaches do?

I do. When I was younger, I used to come off and sit at the end of the bench. Now that I'm older and I have aspirations of maybe coaching an Olympic team, I sit in the front, so I can hear what's going on, and I can see how coaches react to different things. It's a beautiful process.



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The head coach gets a lot of attention, but it's the assistant coaches who stay in gym all day and all night to make sure

that no stone is left unturned. They are the secret behind the success of why we continue to win gold medals. [RS]

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