

Mercy grad basks in Olympic glory

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

Although folks around the world are now well aware of Abby Wambach's offensive prowess in soccer, one of her first headline-making feats was actually as a goal-tender.

As a high-school sophomore at Brighton's Our Lady of Mercy, Wambach's reputation as an intimidating player was already so great that she was inserted into goal — a position she had never played before — to defend a penalty kick late in the 1995 Section 5 title game against Greece Athena. The psychological ploy worked as Wambach made an easy save; a few seconds later her Monarchs were celebrating a 3-2 win and the sectional crown.

In the nine years since, the 24-year-

Sports

old Wambach has risen to national and international prominence in her customary role as a scoring dynamo at forward. The stage was never bigger than this past summer, when Wambach scored the winning goal in the United States women's team's 2-1 overtime victory over Brazil Aug. 26 in Athens, Greece, that secured the Olympic gold medal.

At 5 feet, 11 inches — and a tenacity to match her powerful frame — Wambach picks up numerous fouls but finds the net at crunch time. She scored four goals in six Olympic games, the most crucial one coming in the gold-medal contest. Late in overtime against Brazil, Wambach

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Holy Cross School seventh-grader Sara Klinkbell (left) and eighth-grader Samantha Norton head toward the goal during a Catholic Youth Organization game against All Saints No. 1 at Memorial Park in Gates Sept. 21.



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Pittsford native and Olympic gold medalist Abby Wambach is surrounded by adoring fans during the first session of her girls-only soccer camp at Pittsford Mendon High School Sept. 18.

thrust forward to launch a bullet of a head shot from 10 yards away, converting a corner kick from U.S. teammate Kristine Lilly.

Whereas the goal was seen by television viewers worldwide, several of Wambach's family members were on hand at Athens' Karaiskaki Stadium for the historic moment. Wambach's mother, Judy, said she did not clearly see her daughter score, but amid all the subsequent cheering she heard the name "Wambach" announced over the public-address system.

"I sat down; I couldn't believe it. I didn't actually faint, but I had a moment. Then I got up and cheered even louder," Judy Wambach recalled.

After the game ended, Wambach made her way over to the bleachers where her sister, Laura, gave her a U.S. flag that she wrapped around herself. "She had said prior to the game that she wanted an American flag," Judy Wambach said.

A few weeks later, Wambach returned to her home town a triumphant hero. She got a rousing late reception at the Greater Rochester International Airport Sept. 15, then attended a brother's wedding and conducted her own girls' soccer camp Sept. 18-19 in her native town of Pittsford. She reappeared Sept. 25 with the rest of the U.S. national team during an exhibition match against Iceland at Rochester's Frontier Field. The game — which the U.S. team won 4-3 — sold out its 10,000-plus seats just hours after tickets went on sale.

Wambach's ability to score was evident during a five-year varsity career at Our Lady of Mercy, where she scored 142 career goals, including 34 as a senior in 1997. She also

starred at college for Division I University of Florida, where she broke all school scoring records with 96 goals and 49 assists during a career from 1998-2001 that included an NCAA national championship for the Gators when she was a freshman.

More recently, Wambach, who debuted with the U.S. national team in 2001, helped that squad to a third-place finish in the 2003 Women's World Cup before attaining Olympic glory this year. Professionally, Wambach was the second player taken in the 2002 Women's United Soccer Association draft and was named WUSA Rookie of the Year as a member of the Washington Freedom. In 2003, Wambach, while playing along soccer icon Mia Hamm, tied for the league lead in scoring and led the Freedom to the league championship, scoring the winning goal in the title game.

Unfortunately the WUSA folded after the 2003 season, leaving Wambach, who had been living in Washington, D.C., without a permanent residence. "She's a nomad right now," her mother said. Still, Wambach will keep busy through numerous playing commitments with the U.S. national team in the months and years to come. She also plans to return to college at some point to finish up her bachelor's degree in business.

Whatever her future holds, it's certain that Wambach is now more easily noticed wherever she goes. Following her Olympic goal she has appeared on several national television shows, including David Letterman's.

"This is probably the ultimate for her," Judy Wambach said of her daughter's dramatic Olympic moment. "What an achievement."