

U.S. women

THE FUTURE IS NOW?

It was just an exhibition, played against a hugely outmanned foe, but the U.S. women's national team offered a glimpse into its future during a 7-0 romp over Mexico Jan. 12 in Charleston, S.C.

The view was largely enticing, particularly in midfield, where youngsters Aleisha Cramer and Aly Wagner, both collegians, teamed up for the final half-hour.

They were among five college players — with Catherine Reddick, Jena Kluegel and Danielle Slaton — seeing action for U.S. coach April Heinrichs, who then placed all five onto her roster for matches against Norway, Germany and China Jan. 23-27 in and around Guangzhou.

Cramer, a tall, athletic sophomore from BYU, has been turning heads since her 1998 U.S. debut, when she was 16. Wagner, a sensationally gifted junior who led Santa

Clara to the NCAA women's title, was the final player cut from the 1999 Women's World Cup roster and a alternate for the 2000 Olympics.

Both played superbly in the triumph over the Mexicans, suggesting their midfield partnership could bloom sooner than later. Cramer, a defensive midfielder, is a strong tackler, organizer and distributor; playmaker Wagner, whose growing maturation has been evident the past six months, may be the most creative player the United States has developed.

"For Aly to come in and play the balls that she did — and finish — showed a high level of sophistication," said U.S. coach April Heinrichs. "And every time Aleisha Cramer touches the ball, you can tell she's a special player."

Wagner, who last appeared for the Yanks in July 2000, came on for Julie Foudy in the 61st minute, was commanding behind the front line, scoring one goal — volleying a clearance from the top of the box — and setting up another during a driving storm.

Slaton, Wagner's Santa Clara teammate and a 2000 Olympian, fared well in her first U.S. action since September 2000, using her speed to run down balls while in the middle during the first half, then adding to the U.S. attack when moved to the left flank for the final 45 minutes.

— **Scott French**