

The Road to China

BY SCOTT FRENCH

Tiffany Roberts, eluding Norway's Monica Knudsen at the Four Nations Tournament in China, could be the Americans' starting defensive midfielder at the World Cup.



The landscape has changed dramatically since the U.S. women's national team last prepared for a major championship, so the schedule Coach April Heinrichs has devised in advance of next fall's Women's World Cup shouldn't surprise anybody.

The Americans will spend less time together, play fewer games and leave the heavy-duty treks to their rivals as they gear up to defend their 1999 title come September in China.

The birth of the WUSA and memories of the grueling road the Americans traveled in advance of the 2000 Olympics in Sydney guided Heinrichs to scale down the U.S. schedule this year. Her squad plans to play only 14 matches before heading to China, just five of

team won the silver medal in Sydney, falling to Norway in overtime in the gold-medal game. "Our priority [this year] was to have control over our schedule rather than let our schedule drive the team's energy and enthusiasm for the game."

With a full slate of WUSA matches awaiting the vast majority of the nearly three dozen players in contention for 20 roster spots in China, it made little sense to pile games onto the U.S. schedule once the league's third season begins on April 5. The plan is for the national team to play one game a month — except in August, during the WUSA's stretch run and playoffs — after leaving the Algarve.

The foundation for the U.S. preparations was set last year, when Heinrichs revamped

Nations Tournament games against Norway, China and Sweden in China. A few others will be permitted to skip the Feb. 16 clash with Iceland in Charleston, S.C.

WUSA training camps will open shortly after that, and four Algarve Cup contests — against Canada, France, Sweden and in a placement match — will complete the second phase, which is critical for players trying to win a spot on the roster.

Heinrichs says that, barring injury, there are "13 or 14" players who are assured of going to China. The team's foundation — Hamm, Lilly, Foudy, Tiffeny Milbrett, Joy Fawcett, Brandi Chastain, Shannon MacMillan, Cindy Parlow — and young players making considerable impact, such as playmaker Aly Wagner, are part of that group.

Those fighting for a spot — the Jenny Bensons and Angela Huculeses, Abby Wambachs and Devvyn Hawkines—will be judged largely on how they perform early this year.

"January, February and March are about player development, not just winning," Heinrichs said. "Along with that also comes [that we] start to narrow [the pool]. ... The first priority is to get as many players as much playing time as we can."

The U.S. primarily plays a 4-4-2 formation with a flat backline, a tight diamond in midfield and, more often than not, the pairing of a tall striker with a smaller, speedier forward. Versatility will be important: a player who can excel at more than one position has the edge on players who cannot.

Heinrichs says she will take three goalkeepers to China. At least six defenders will be on the list, and five or more forwards — including a few who can drop into midfield — are expected on the roster.

"It's not just about making the roster, it's about impacting," Heinrichs said. "It's not just about starting for us, it's about having key performances ... world-class moments."

Work toward such moments will be critical in the third phase, during the WUSA season. Heinrichs will be watching players closely during the campaign and calling in a narrowed pool for matches that are tentatively slated for April 21, May 17, June 14 and July 13. Sites and opponents aren't yet concrete. Brazil, Mexico and South Korea are potential foes.

The final phase, after the Aug. 23 WUSA final, is slated for the Home Depot National Training Center in Carson, Calif., which is scheduled to be completed by late spring. The U.S. women will play their final preparation match in the center's stadium in early September, then depart for China. ■

**A new landscape —
defined by the WUSA —
means the Americans will
play fewer matches in
preparation for next fall's
Women's World Cup.**



CHINA PHOTOS/REUTERS PHOTOS

Tiffeny Milbrett (right) is part of a core of players assured a role in China, barring injury.

them — all on home soil — after the Algarve Cup concludes on March 20.

Contrast that with the slate Heinrichs inherited when she took over as U.S. coach in early 2000. The Americans' preparations for Sydney included 30 games with trips to Portugal, Australia, Germany and Norway, five tournaments and games all over the United States.

"I think in 2000 we unequivocally made just about every mistake we could make in scheduling. It wasn't very good ...," said Heinrichs, whose

her squad's primary formation and style of play while incorporating a new generation of talent with veterans who have played critical roles in the Americans' successes the previous dozen years.

It paid off with an impressive run to the CONCACAF Gold Cup title last fall. Preparations for the Sept. 24-Oct. 11 Women's World Cup, to be completed in four phases, commenced in earnest once the celebration died down.

The first, vitally important, took place the two months prior to the 2003 opener against Japan in San Diego. Players not involved in college soccer were told to take time off. There will be few, if any, additional rests prior to the World Cup.

Mia Hamm, Julie Foudy and Kristine Lilly — all in their 30s, all national-teamers since the 1980s — were given January off, missing the 0-0 draw with Japan and the Four