

Trophy secondary at World Cup warmup

April Heinrichs' crew got a good glimpse in January of what it can expect when it defends its Women's World Cup title next fall, tasting the atmosphere — and competition — awaiting in China come September.

Winning the annual Four Nations tournament was a delightful extra for the U.S. women's national team, which overcame three of its stiffest WWC title challengers to capture China's second annual winter fest.

Wintry it was, as the Americans endured sub-freezing temperatures and a team-wide bout with the flu to claim the title despite a rather one-sided loss to

their hosts. Victories over Norway and Germany were the difference, although winning was secondary to Heinrichs' preparations for the fourth World Cup.

"[Winning the Four Nations] was important, and it also wasn't important ...," Heinrichs said. "If this were the Group of Death [at the World Cup], then we just advanced."

They needed a 1-0 win over the Germans, on Devvyn Hawkins' first international goal — and a China-Norway draw in the finale — to do so, edging the Chinese by a point.

Winning the event will spur confidence, Heinrichs noted, especially for young players

battling for the final spots on the 20-woman World Cup roster. More important was the experience gained.

"This group of players experienced World Cup-like environments on and off the

Devvyn Hawkins celebrates her goal with Christie Pearce in a 1-0 victory over Germany that clinched for the United States the Four Nations title.

field and got a taste of the excitement that the World Cup will generate," Heinrichs said. "We played in World Cup venues, and the players were able to play against the three best teams in the world. We also dealt with a multitude of adverse conditions, and we played with three very different starting lineups."

Heinrichs added that almost all the players had a "quality opportunity" to play a high level of competition.

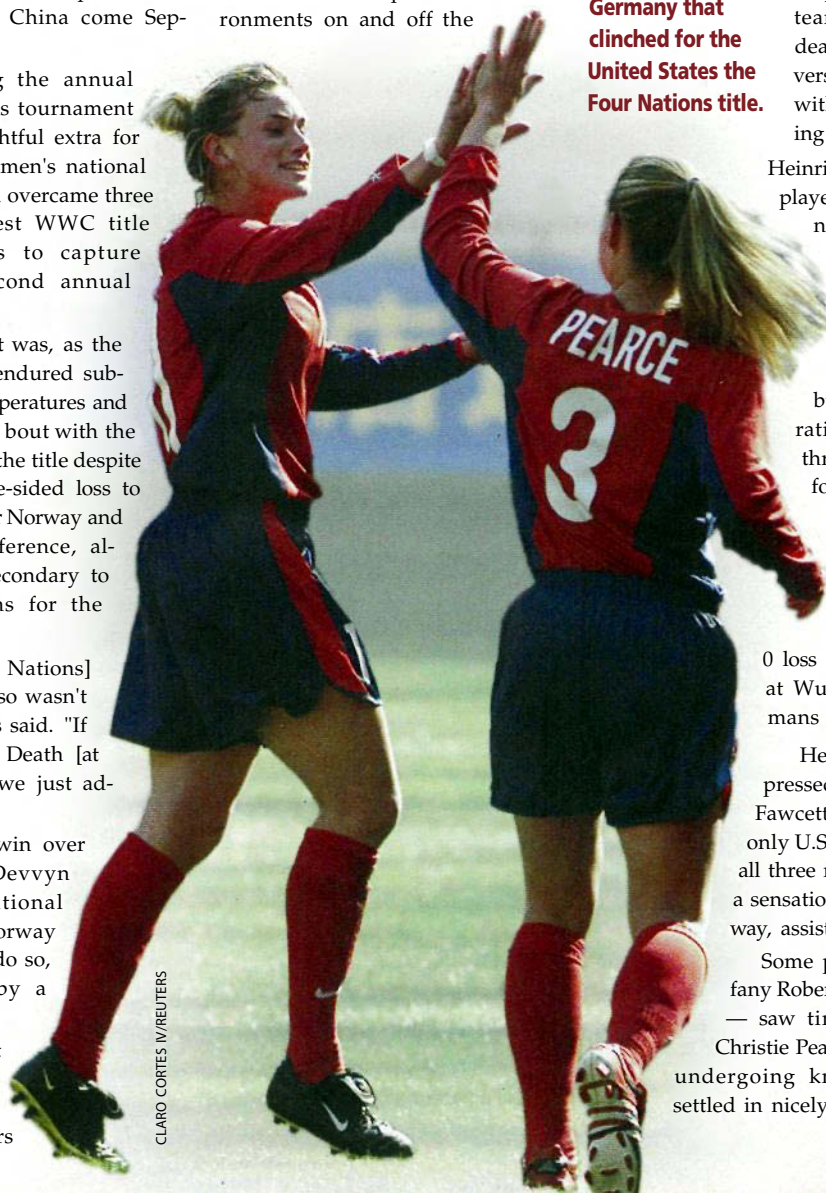
That will mean more when the World Cup kicks off Sept. 11 than will the Four Nations trophy. The bulk of the American preparations are slated for the first three months of the year, before the WUSA season begins.

The Americans impressed in the second half of the 3-1 win over Norway in the opener at Yiwu, battled a virus and freezing rain in a 2-0 loss to China before 40,000 fans at Wuhan, then toppled the Germans in Shanghai.

Heinrichs said she was most impressed by central defenders Joy Fawcett and Brandi Chastain, the only U.S. players to see 90 minutes in all three matches. Aly Wagner offered a sensational performance against Norway, assisting on all three goals.

Some players — Kate Sobrero, Tiffany Roberts, Lorrie Fair, Angela Hucles — saw time in different roles. And Christie Pearce, in her first matches since undergoing knee surgery last summer, settled in nicely.

— Scott French



CLARO CORTES IV/REUTERS