

GOLD STANDARD

Penn Staters Alyssa Naeher and Ali Krieger help lift the U.S. to a Women's World Cup title

SHAWN MEDOW | BLUE WHITE CONTRIBUTOR

PASADENA, Calif. – The biggest moment of goalkeeper Alyssa Naeher's career came in the 84th minute of the semifinal in the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup in Lyon, France.

She and the tournament-favorite United States Women's National Team had a 2-1 lead over England. But that lead was 12 yards away from being erased. A converted penalty kick for England would more than likely send the match to extra time.

England captain Stephanie Houghton took a short four steps to the ball and struck it to her left. Naeher dived to her right, directly into the path of the rolling shot. She grabbed the ball and held it tight.

"She saved our ass in that moment," co-captain Alex Morgan said afterward.

The United States held on to win, 2-1, before reclaiming the World Cup title in the final against the Netherlands – a 2-0 shutout for Naeher. She allowed only three goals over the course of the team's seven games.

"Our coaches did a great job preparing us for every situation," Naeher said at the Rose Bowl after the United States began its Victory Tour by defeating Ireland, 3-0, on Aug. 3. "Everything they could see coming, we prepared for. You've got four years to prepare for something like that."

In the Lyon crowd, Naeher's twin sister and parents jumped with joy, while Naeher's Penn State coach, Erica Dambach, filmed and tweeted a video from her seat in the stadium.

Naeher played in 78 games at Penn State and said her time in University Park prepared her for a career as the starting goalie for the four-time world champions.

"I learned how to be a professional," said Naeher, who plays club soccer for the NWSL's Chicago Red Stars. "[Dambach] taught us not just how to be good players



NAEHER



KRIEGER

and held us at a high level, and that helped us going forward as professionals."

The team arrived back home to a ticker tape parade in New York. Fellow Penn State alum and defender Ali Krieger shared a float with Naeher, and the two couldn't help but notice that their alma mater was represented in the crowds lining the streets of the city.

"Every person we saw who wore a Penn State shirt or memorabilia, we were shouting each other out like, 'Oh my God, look!'" Krieger said. "Having that connection with your alumni is pretty amazing. You don't find that everywhere."

but to be good people and how to prioritize things and mentally prepare for things. She treated us like professionals

WOMEN'S SOCCER

PSU trio named to Hermann Trophy watch list

Penn State players Kaleigh Riehl, Sam Coffey and Frankie Tagliaferri have been named to the MAC Hermann Trophy watch list for college soccer's top honor. The MAC Hermann Trophy is presented annually to the United Soccer Coaches National Players of the Year in NCAA Division I in men's and women's soccer as voted on by Division I coaches.

Riehl, a senior from Fairfax Station, Va., was named a semifinalist for the MAC Hermann Trophy in 2018 after anchoring a PSU defense that allowed only 13 goals all season. She was named a first-team All-American and claimed Big Ten Defender of the Year honors.

Coffey transferred from Boston College, where she won first-team All-America honors as a sophomore last season. A resident of Sleepy Hollow, N.Y., Coffey received Midfielder of the Year accolades from the Atlantic

Coast Conference and was a semifinalist for the MAC Hermann Trophy. She tallied 38 points on 12 goals and 14 assists while playing for the Eagles.

Tagliaferri, a junior from Colts Neck, N.J., was tied for the team lead with 19 points last season, scoring seven goals and adding five assists. She earned first-team All-Region and first-team All-Big Ten honors for her performance.

Two Nittany Lions have won the MAC Hermann Trophy. Raquel Rodriguez claimed the award in 2015, as she led the Nittany Lions to their first national championship, while Christie Welsh won it in 2001.

Penn State began its 2019 season ranked No. 6 in the United Soccer Coaches poll. Defending national champion Florida State garnered 33 of 35 first-place votes to open the season ranked No. 1. ■

The Penn State connection on the USWNT is a special one for Krieger and Naeher, who have had to compete with the likes of North Carolina alumnae such as Tobin Heath, Allie Long, Ashlyn Harris and Crystal Dunn. However, Penn State's 19 Big Ten titles and 2015 NCAA championship keep the Nittany Lions on the national stage.

"The Penn State vibe with our alumni is just something that I cherish and feel like we're so connected no matter what year you graduated or what experience you had," Krieger said.

Naeher didn't follow a straight path to her starting spot on the USWNT. She was a backup to Hope Solo, who was the starter in the 2015 World Cup and is considered to be the best goalie the women's game has seen. Solo had her contract terminated after the 2016 Olympic Games, where the USWNT was bounced by Sweden in the quarterfinals – the team's earliest exit in a major tournament.

"I never got wrapped up in that, it wasn't my focus," Naeher said. "She had her career, a great career. It was my opportunity now for this next chapter, so I'm just proud that I was able to help this team win this year."

Naeher had big gloves to fill, not only as the starting goalie for the best national team in the world, but also as a leader on the field.

"I think Alyssa is kind of a quiet leader. She's not trying to be someone she's not," said Carli Lloyd, a USWNT co-captain and 2016 FIFA World Player of the Year. "She does her job, she does it to the best of her ability every single day and she goes out, she tries to get better and you can always count on her."

At 31 years old, Naeher is one of 11 players on the national team who are age 30 or older. She has been helping develop some of the younger players who may play pivotal roles in next summer's Tokyo Olympics and in the 2023 World Cup.

"Keep grinding away and working hard and wait for your opportunity," Naeher said. "When you have it, be ready for it. Control what you can control. I'm just glad that when the opportunity came, I was ready for it." ■

WOMEN'S VOLLEYBALL

Lions 8th in preseason rankings

Penn State was ranked eighth in the season's first American Volleyball Coaches Association Division I Top 25, which was released on Aug. 13.

The Nittany Lions, who have been nationally ranked in 443 consecutive polls dating to the end of the 1988 season, are one of seven Big Ten teams in this year's preseason poll. Ranked ahead of Penn State to start the season are No. 2 Nebraska, No. 3 Minnesota, No. 5 Wisconsin, and No. 6 Illinois. Two other Big Ten teams are in the top 20, with Michigan ranked 15th and Purdue 17th.

Penn State plays 12 matches against nine nationally ranked teams this season, including four against nonconference opponents. The Nittany Lions host No. 1 Stanford – the defending national champion – and No. 11 Oregon as part of the Big Ten/Pac 12 Challenge on Sept. 13-14. The Lions are also scheduled to play two matches against No. 12 Pittsburgh, which won the Atlantic Coast Conference title last season. The Panthers will come to Rec Hall on Sept. 20 and will host the second match of the series at the Petersen Events Center on Sept. 22.

The Lions will open their season later this month when they host the Penn State Classic. Hofstra, Holy Cross and Wichita State are set to compete in the four-team, six-match event, which will take place Aug. 30-31 at Rec Hall.

PSU GRADS TOKYO-BOUND Penn State alumnae Haleigh Washington and Megan Courtney played integral roles as the U.S. Women's National Volleyball Team secured an automatic bid to the 2020 Summer Olympics in Tokyo.

The former Nittany Lions helped the United States go 3-0 in the Pool C Qualification Tournament in Bossier

City, La., earlier this month, with victories over No. 23 Kazakhstan, No. 16 Bulgaria and No. 11 Argentina. The U.S. squad entered the event as the third-ranked team in the world.

"It feels amazing," Washington said. "There was a point where I was on the floor, and I was in this moment where I was [thinking], 'We are playing to go to the Olympics right now.' That's what this match meant. It is surreal. It is amazing. I am excited for the next grind and going to Tokyo."

The U.S. posted a 3-0 (25-22, 25-17, 25-23) win over Argentina in the final match to clinch an Olympic berth.

Washington contributed five kills on 11 attacks, two blocks and two aces, while Courtney was unofficially credited with a 50 positive reception percent on 26 chances and added 11 digs.

In July, the Penn State duo had helped lift the U.S. team to victory in the Volleyball Nations League, with Washington winning Best Blocker honors and Courtney being named Best Libero. But Courtney said that title was just a stepping stone.

"We talk about it all the time," she said following the Americans' victory over Argentina. "This was our big goal for the year. The VNL win was good, but our main tournament was focusing on the Olympic qualifier. We took care of business, although it wasn't easy, teams definitely didn't give it to us. We had to earn it. Just really excited for this team's opportunity to play in Tokyo."

The victory over Kazakhstan came in straight sets, and Team USA added a come-from-behind win in five sets over Bulgaria. Washington chipped in five kills on nine attacks, four blocks and an ace for 10 points against Bulgaria. Courtney provided 25 receptions and nine digs. ■