



WET BEHIND THE EARS

Teenager Tony Azevedo is in the driver's seat for U.S. water polo

Crossover Appeal

U.S. women's basketball coach Nell Fortner isn't taking any chances. Not with the Aussies, Russians and Chinese coming on strong and the WNBA season cutting into her prep time. "We're approaching the next five months as if we're going to Sydney in April," she says.

First up, a 12-game college tour, starting Nov. 1 at Stanford and ending Dec. 12 at Illinois. The U.S. features Olympic vets Dawn Staley, Teresa Edwards, Lisa Leslie, Nikki McCray and Ruthie Bolton-Holifield, as well as newcomers Chamique Holdsclaw, Katie Smith, DeLisha Milton, Natalie Williams and Yolanda Griffith. Some schedule highlights:

Nov. 7 at Tennessee: Battle-tested, quick and ready to bang, the Lady Vols should provide the toughest test, as Chamique faces former mates Tamika Catchings and Semeka Randall.

Nov. 10 at Duke: The undersized Devils will pack it in and try to force Team USA to win from the outside. Most intriguing matchup? Center Lisa Leslie vs. a mirror image of her younger hoops self, 6'7" frosh Lello Gebisa.

Nov. 28 at Purdue: The Boilermakers shared the '96-97 Big Ten title under Fortner, then won it all last season for Carolyn Peck. Now they'll rely on sweet-shooting guard Katie Douglas, 6'4" center Camille Cooper and new coach Kristy Curry's man-to-man.

Dec. 9 at Louisiana Tech: With lots of size and tough D, this vet group could exploit the nationals' sole weakness, a turnover-prone offense. If nothing else, speedy playmaker Tamicha Jackson will keep Staley and Edwards on their toes.

-Anne Marie Cruz

- 11.2- Spike Jones
- 12.2 Wall-to-wall volleyball at women's and men's World Cup in Japan.

Don't move or you're gonna get hurt," they warned, pulling out a razor and pinning him down. So he lay there, stiff as a goal post, praying they wouldn't mess with his hair as they shaved off his left eyebrow with several nerve-racking strokes.

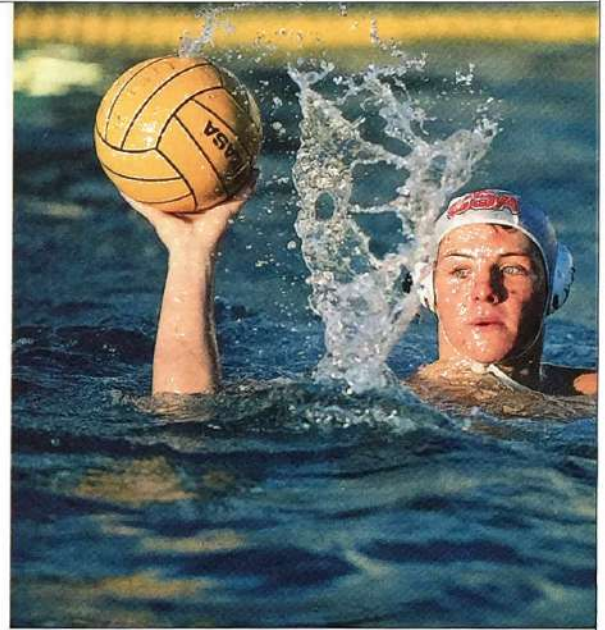
Welcome to the big-time, kid.

As far as hazing rituals go, Tony Azevedo knows he got off easy last month when his teammates on the U.S. national water polo squad cornered him in his Sydney hotel room during the World Cup, bestowing a twisted honor reserved for the youngest member of the bunch (Make that the youngest ever). Even if they had shaved his head, this high school senior isn't about to complain.

"He's probably one of the best shots in the world right now," says 29-year-old two-meter man Chris Humbert. In a sport that requires strength and speed above the surface and craft and cojones beneath it, Azevedo more than holds his own against men nearly twice his age. (He turns 18 on Nov. 21.) From the waist up, water polo looks a little like basketball played with soccer nets—seven on a side. From the waist down, it's like ultimate fighting, as players hold, kick and grab to gain any advantage. And no, they don't wear cups.

A native of Long Beach, Calif., Azevedo grew up in and around the pool, watching his father, Ricardo, coach many of the same players he now calls teammates. (Ricardo was an assistant on the '96 squad that finished seventh in Atlanta.) Imagine the surprise two summers ago when the guys heard that "little" Tony—he's 6'1", 193 pounds—was joining the group. As Humbert recalls, "I said, 'Oh, as what? The water boy?' I had no idea."

The No. 3 scorer on last summer's Pan Am Games squad, Azevedo manned his driver's post like a vet, helping the U.S. to win gold and clinch a spot at the 2000 Olympics. But the team is by no means guaranteed a top-three finish in Sydney. The United States hasn't medaled at the Games since 1988



Sure, he's got a killer shot, but he still has to finish high school.

(silver), and the gold drought dates to 1904. At the recent World Cup, Azevedo faced off against Spain's Manuel Estiarte, a 38-year-old five-time Olympian and arguably the best player on the planet. "It was like getting to guard Michael Jordan," Tony says. "I knew all his moves from watching the videos." Estiarte never scored under Azevedo's watch, but Spain won the game and later took bronze behind Hungary and Italy, while the U.S. finished a disappointing sixth.

Now Azevedo is back at Long Beach Wilson High. An outstanding student (3.8 GPA), he plans to earn his diploma by January so he can train for Sydney with his teammates. In the meantime, he's collecting scholarship offers from the likes of Stanford and UCLA, trying to lead his prep team to its fourth straight Southern California championship ... and scanning his eyebrow for signs of life. "They said it'll take about three weeks to grow back," he says. "Hope they weren't lying."

-Anne Marie Jeffords