

## **U.S. women see swift changes in world game**

By Rachel Blount

Candice Wiggins and Lindsey Harding saw two sides of China's Olympic preparations last month when the Lynx guards were part of the U.S. women's basketball team that played in a Beijing tournament. Outside the glittering, just-opened arena, they spoke English with taxi drivers and watched landscapers beautify the city that will host the Summer Games in August.

Inside Wukesong Arena, they got a taste of how seriously China is preparing its athletes for these Olympics. The country has poured money into its sports programs in an effort to top the medals table. Australian coach Tom Maher was hired to remold a women's basketball program that had derailed over the past decade, and China beat the United States 84-81 to win the Good Luck Beijing tournament.

U.S. coach Anne Donovan said China has caught up to several countries after its dismal ninth-place finish at the 2004 Olympics. That's good news for the growth of women's basketball, but it adds one more complication to a challenging period for the U.S. As players split the year between their WNBA teams and high-paying overseas leagues, Donovan has precious little time to develop a cohesive team -- jeopardizing the U.S.'s chances of extending its string of three consecutive Olympic gold medals.

"We're struggling," Donovan said. "We've never seen this in women's basketball. Because the rest of the world is catching up, we're going to have to change what we do in terms of carving out time for training camps.

"We're used to having players show up for camps. But other than [the 2007 FIBA Americas championship], we haven't had any semblance of an Olympic team together since Athens. Our chemistry will have to come together very quickly."

The U.S. has 29 players in its Olympic pool, including Harding, Wiggins, Lynx star Seimone Augustus and former Gophers Lindsay Whalen and Janel McCarville. A 12-player Olympic roster will be announced soon.

In an odd shuffling of circumstances, the evolution in the women's game has put Donovan into a position similar to that of the U.S. men's coaches a few years ago. The men's teams were collections of all-stars who rarely convened for training camps, and their sorry performances at the 2004 Olympics (third) and 2002 world championships (sixth) led to major changes.

Under managing director Jerry Colangelo and head coach Mike Krzyzewski, the U.S. has worked toward a more committed, cohesive roster.

The women's program -- which has not lost an Olympic game since 1992 and is 50-1 in major international competitions since 1996 -- provided them a model.

But the demands of the WNBA season, which begins this week, and the international growth of women's pro basketball have made it much harder for the U.S. to pull its players together. A number of WNBA players missed all or part of training camp because they still were playing with overseas teams. Eight Lynx players -- including Augustus -- still were abroad when camp started.

This, of course, is what women in the sport have long dreamed of: the opportunity to earn a living playing basketball. Donovan understands that, even as it complicates her task.

"I don't think anybody expected salaries overseas to grow the way they have," said the coach, a three-time Olympian who played professionally in Japan and Italy. "Nobody begrudges the players the money they make overseas. But this program suffers because of that."

The U.S. will play in Group B in the Olympics, along with China, Mali, New Zealand and two teams that will be determined through a qualifying tournament in June. Russia and Australia, the other world powers in women's hoops, are in Group A.

Donovan will have her team together only two weeks before the Games. She said she remains confident the U.S. will weather its shifting circumstances; so do her players, whose resolve is spiked with a keen awareness.

"Everyone wants to take us down," Wiggins said. "It's going to be really, really competitive."