

ALL WELL IN BEIJING - SU WOMEN'S SOCCER COACH REPORTS ON U.S. TEAM'S HEALTHY STAY IN CHINA.

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As an assistant coach for U.S. women's soccer, Phil Wheddon had two goals for the team's 2 1/2-week stay in China for the Olympics: win the gold medal and make sure no one gets sick.

Over the last seven years, the team has played in a number of Chinese cities, with predictable results.

"There hadn't been one trip where no one had been sick," Wheddon said. "Everyone at some point had been sick in China. Our goal was to avoid that as much as possible."

Avoiding sickness was a success, and so was the part about winning the gold. The squad won its second consecutive Olympic gold medal, defeating Brazil 1-0 in the final.

Now Wheddon faces challenges back in the states as the new head coach of the Syracuse women's soccer program.

The England native's previous collegiate experience includes an assistant position from 1997 to 2000 at Southern Connecticut State, which won two Division II national championships during his stay. SU is 2-3-1 under his watch, although its first win of the season came while Wheddon was still in Beijing.

No matter where it played, the U.S. team received the royal treatment, having miles of traffic blocked off for its bus in cities with populations in the millions.

"It was pretty intense," Wheddon said. "Everyone felt safe and secure. There were never any issues. Practice sessions were closed for the most part. The Chinese did a great job of organizing it."

Even though Wheddon wasn't there to witness Syracuse's first victory, the two sides shared a moment that got the season off on the right foot. Following the gold-medal game, the SU players, who watched the game live, decided to call their new coach and offer him congratulations by leaving a message.

"We didn't think he was going to answer, said Eliza Bennett-Hattan, SU's starting goalie. "And then he said, 'Hello' and no one knew what to say, so we just yelled, 'Phil!'"

The surprise was the same from nearly 7,000 miles away.

"I'm in China and the phone rang and it was just a jumble of numbers," Wheddon said. "There was no 315 area code or anything like that."

"I wasn't expecting it. To have that support from afar was fantastic. It shows that they're invested in me and I'm invested in them. Immediately, there's a rapport and a belief in each other, which we're trying to capitalize on here."

The players shared the sentiment during that phone call, realizing they had connected with their new coach.

"It was a great feeling knowing that that's our coach with an Olympic team out there in Beijing and they won the gold," senior defender Sarah VanSickle said. "Especially after they lost the first game. So, it was great to see them come back."

Wheddon brings a relaxed style of coaching to Syracuse and has implemented a new formation that he thinks fits his players.

Lauren Cappelli, a senior defender, likes Wheddon's approach, which allows the midfield to control the ball and create goal-scoring opportunities. Cappelli said her coach's laid-back nature allows the team to think for itself on the field.

Since Wheddon has served as goalkeeper coach for the national team, most recognize his name from the controversy surrounding the benching of starting U.S. goalkeeper Hope Solo during the 2007 World Cup. Ultimately, Wheddon said, the head coach made the decision. He has never addressed the situation to others and said he never will.

Based on that experience and working with coaches at the international level, Wheddon has molded his own style of teaching that he will bring to SU.

Prior to the Olympics, three prominent players on the national team -- including Rochester native Abby Wambach -- were sidelined by injuries. In the process, Wheddon learned that getting players to jell is one of the most important parts of coaching.

"Everyone contributed," Wheddon said of the Olympic team. "The power of the team is something that you take away from it. If everyone believes in each other and you work hard for each other and you do those things that are necessary, you can accomplish anything."

"You may not always be on paper the best team. But if you're organized and disciplined you can pull through."

Caption: PHOTO Gary Walts / The Post-Standard SYRACUSE women's soccer coach Phil Wheddon enters the field at SU Soccer Stadium for a game against Colgate on Sunday. The Orange won 2-0. Wheddon was the goalkeeper coach for the U.S. women's team at the summer Olympics.

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