**Rough Draft**

Abby Wombach and Hope Solo are the two most decorated players currently playing on the U.S. Women’s soccer team. They are the faces of the U.S. women’s soccer team and Wombach is on the short-list of best players in the world. That being said, Lauren Cheney is starting to distinguish herself as one of the best players in the world.

Former UCLA Bruin Lauren Cheney is a playmaker. When Cheney is has the ball, good things tend to happen. Cheney’s teammates make a conscious effort to include her in the play whenever she is on the field.

In terms of pure athleticism, it’s hard for any player in U.S. Soccer to match Cheney’s physical tools. Whether it is scoring, assisting or initiziating the offense, Cheney uses her athletic talents to consistently make incredible plays.

Cheney has been a highly regarded, multi-talented player her entire career. Her career trajectory has been similar to a top baseball prospect who finally gets his call-up and plays how everyone expected; amazing. The World Cup was Cheney’s call-up to Women’s soccer stardom, and she performed beautifully.

What makes Cheney’s perfomance so incredible was that she was moved from forward to outside-midfielder right before the tournament started. This was a moved designed to get Cheney on the field.

U.S. Women’s soccer coach Pia Sondhage was making the educated risk that it was more important for Cheney to play a position that may be unnatural for her than to have Cheney sit on the bench behind the incredibly deep American forwards.

The reason Cheney’s stellar performance was not a surprise is because she had no shortage of success before her breakout performance in the World Cup. Her ability to switch positions and play so admiradbly is a testimate to Cheney’s playmaking abilities.

Even at college, there were signs that at some point in her career the spotlight would be on her. Cheney is the all-time UCLA goal scorer tallying up 71 during her time as a Bruin. Not to mention, she is holds the career record for game winning goals with 28.

Stats like Cheney’s imply that she plays at her best during the most crucial moments. Even in her college days Lauren Cheney was a player who could be counted on to make a play when the team needed her.

Lauren Cheney also understands UCLA gave her the tools that led to her becoming such an important part of the program. She gave some credit for her success to her time spent playing soccer for the Gold and Blue.

Cheney is aware of the opportunity playing in the Pac-10 provided her and gave some advice to current Pac-12 women’s soccer players. “They have the best environment, they have everything offered, they have the coaches, great players around them and they should take full advantage of that.”

Professionally, Cheney’s talent was noticed early on in her career. In 2007 she was names the United States Soccer Federation’s young female athlete, which goes to the top player in the U-20 age division. For the early part of career Lauren Cheney looked like a player waiting to break out.

Considering that before the World Cup Lauren Cheney was a rotational player it is impressive that she sixth on the U.S. women’s career goals list among current members of the team. She has scored 16 goals in her career on the women’s soccer team.

Currently, Cheney is the third leading scorer on the team with five goals. Only behind Abby Wombach’s seven netters and Carli Loyd’s six strikes. She has been a consistent goal scorer all season.

Coach Pia Sondhage saw Cheney’s consistency and was hoping that her knack for playmaking would benefit team USA in the 2011 World Cup. Coach Sondhage was correct in giving Cheney the opportunity because Cheney played outstanding for the entire tournament. Cheney’s goal against France in the World Cup stood out because it gave Team USA a 2-0 lead and was critical in the Americans victory.

The international soccer community took notice of Cheney’s breakout performance. She joined Hope Solo, Shannon Boxx and Abby Wombach as the Americans who earned a spot on the World Cup all-star team.

Based on the high level of play that made Lauren Cheney a World Cup all-star, the decision by coach Pia Sondhage to play her really paid off. Coach Sondhage saw that Cheney’s skill set was so good that it became vital for her to see significant playing time. Cheney he responded by standing out during the 2011 World Cup.

Cheney tells a great story that shows the significance of her position change and the uncertainty a big move like that creates. She remembers asking Abby Wombach the night before the first World Cup game, “Am I good enough to play outside-mid?” Abby responded, “I honestly don’t know, but you better make the best of it.”

That is what Lauren Cheney did, she made the best of it and it turned out to be her coming-out party on the international soccer scene. “I wouldn’t say I was the next best thing at left-wing but I played my role and I did what I could.” Humbly said for a World Cup All-Star.

Despite her humility, Cheney has the mindset of a playmaker. Cheney believes that if the ball is in her possession it will increase the U.S. women’s chances of winning. She said, “I want to keep on making plays and I think that we can only get better.”

An example of Cheney’s playmaking happened on September 22, when the U.S. Women beat the Canadian team 3-0 in Portland, OR. Cheney made an excellent through pass to Alex Morgan which lead to an Abby Wombach header, giving the U.S. team a commanding 2-0 lead late in the match.

After the game, both Abby Wombach and Alex Morgan gave Cheney credit for helping create the goal because of her excellent play on the pass. This is the type of atheticism that Cheney makes which makes her so valuable to the team. It doesn’t show up in the stat-book, but only an elite player could have made the pass that Cheney pulled off.

While Lauren Cheney has always been a big-game playmaker, but this summer she performed under the brightest lights on the biggest stage and succeeded tremendously. This was Cheney’s first experience of being the full-time starter on a stage as large at the World Cup. The experience was valuable for Cheney’s ascension into a leadership role on the team.

Additionally, the drastic position move on short notice required a lot of work to pull off. She was not able to be as much of a vocal leader during the World Cup because she had to put so much energy into a new position.

One way Cheney is hoping to become a leader is to leave an imprint on every game. “I want to be an impact, I got a taste of scoring and playmaking in the World Cup and I want to continue that,” said Cheney about her personal goals on Team U.S.A. If she continues to play the way she has recently, there will be many games ahead in which Lauren Cheney makes an impact.

The newest goal for the American team is to take home the Gold Medal at the 2012 Olympics. There was a palpable excitement in Cheney’s voice when she was asked about what the experience of playing in London will feel like. “London in general is exciting, it is a great, great city,” said Cheney.

Now, Cheney believes she can use her World Cup experience to become a leader in London. She said that there is no way to replicate the environment of the high-stakes matches the Olympics and World Cup provide. Cheney said, “Having that under my belt, playing 90-minute games, I’ll be able to bring some sort of leadership into the Olympics.”

Cheney is stepping into a new role on the U.S. women’s team. She has always been an exceptional athlete and a talented playmaker. Now she hopes to become a player that her younger teammates seek out when they want advice. Cheney is carving out a leadership role on Team U.S.A. and because of her recent play, her teammates are willing to follow.