

Ward Brings Home Gold Again!

Written by Ben Winterrowd
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Success is nothing new to Appalachian State University women's soccer star Kate Ward – she's won a gold medal for the United States three times, including one at this year's Deaflympics after the squad's 2-1 win over Russia in the annual event. No matter how experienced she is, it's always a special event.

"The entire experience was incredible," said Ward. "The team traveled to Bulgaria a week before the games started so that we could adjust to the time change and start training together and preparing ourselves to win a gold medal."

The United States Deaf Women's National Team (USDWNT) came together with deaf athletes from all over the globe for the event, which has taken place every four years since 1924 and is the longest-running multi-sport event excluding the Olympics themselves.

"There were over 4,500 athletes representing 91 countries, so we would see Deaflympic athletes everywhere as we walked along the streets of Sofia, Bulgaria," Ward said. "However, the soccer events were about 45 minutes outside of Sofia, so we unfortunately weren't at the center of all of the excitement."

Despite being thousands of miles away from most of their fan base, the team knew that the support on the home front was huge, a factor that gave the squad an extra lift to go out and be a symbol for the nation.

"We knew we had to represent the red, white and blue to the best of our ability. It was an honor to have the opportunity to represent our country and we were so proud to have brought home the gold medal," said Ward.

Ward struck another type of gold five minutes into the second half of the championship match against Russia, the US squad's top rival, whom it had knocked out of the championships last summer.

"I remember the ball hitting the back of the net and running to celebrate with my teammate who passed me the ball," said Ward. "Everything else leading up to and after that moment is a blur. I still can't believe it."

Five minutes later the United States scored another goal to take a commanding lead and, despite increased pressure from Russia, was able to hold on for a 2-1 victory and another gold medal.

"I didn't realize how much pressure I felt until after the final whistle blew," Ward said. "It was like a huge weight had been lifted off of our shoulders because we had achieved what we'd been training for all year. It was truly an incredible day that I'll never forget."

Affected at an early age with hearing loss following a childhood illness, Ward has adapted seamlessly with her cochlear implant that she has had since the age of six.

"Sometimes it's a struggle if I'm in crowds or loud restaurants, but it's something I've learned to deal with. I'm also very lucky to have people in my life who are willing to help me when I'm in those situations. My Appalachian State teammates and coaches, for example, are incredibly supportive and always willing to be my other set of ears, whether it's on the field or off the field." Ward has also had the support of one of her best friends throughout her life in fellow Mountaineer Jenni Loveless, who nearly caused quite the commotion when the two were growing up together.

"We met playing soccer, of course. Initially we hit it off and became really good friends," said Loveless. "Then on one ODP (Olympic Development Program) trip we were walking back from a practice and she squirted me with her water bottle. So in return, I poured the whole jug that I

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carried over her head and that caused her cochlear to break and she couldn't hear. Then I had to call her Dad and let him know that I broke his daughter's cochlear and she couldn't hear and he'd have to replace it."

The story drew a laugh from both Ward and Loveless, along with head coach Sarah Strickland, who has noted the special bond between the two on several occasions.

On the field, Ward has to be aware of her surroundings, but even more so when playing in the Deaflympics.

"Every player has to take out all hearing devices. Communication obviously becomes more difficult so we have to rely on signing and lip reading when we are on the field."

This experience does nothing but enhance Ward's ability to contribute at a high level for her team in Boone, as she returns ready to start another fall season for Appalachian State.

"My fitness level definitely benefited from playing five games and training everyday for almost three weeks. The US squad consists of elite players who play on professional and college teams across the country and world," said Ward. "Right now, it's important that I allow my body time to recover after three weeks of soccer and get back on the right time schedule. Once my legs are back beneath me, I'm hoping this experience will have prepared me to help Appalachian State to the best of my ability."

Strickland, one of Ward's biggest supporters throughout her international career, has noted that Ward's time playing on the international stage has been a huge boost for the entire team.

"We are so proud of Kate, I can't say enough about her. She is one of the most humble individuals I've ever met in my life and it was great that she had the opportunity to represent Appalachian State on an international stage," said Strickland.

"She does a great job, comes back and is so proud of what her team has accomplished. She shares so much of what they do abroad and when they train and always tells the team everything that goes on," said Strickland. "She even keeps this great blog that she updates while she's out there and even brought back gifts for the entire team."

As Ward and her Appalachian State teammates train for the upcoming season, the focus is sure to shift from her accomplishments in Bulgaria, to the team's goals for it's final Southern Conference Campaign.

But, despite the change in focus – there's no denying that Ward has proven her toughness both on and off the pitch – a trait that is sure to help the entire women's soccer squad as it moves forward.

Photo Courtesy: Kate Ward, ASU Athletics