

Posted: Friday July 27, 2012 7:34PM ; Updated: Friday July 27, 2012 11:41PM



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Team-building guru Shenbaum helped U.S. women gear up for gold

Story Highlights

- ▶ Steve Shenbaum has worked on team-building with some of sports' biggest names
- ▶ Shenbaum's work with the U.S. women's soccer team could pay off big in London
- ▶ He had the players engage in a series of improv and role-playing games on stage

GLASGOW, Scotland -- On April 23, U.S. soccer star Abby Wambach posted an intriguing message on Twitter:

We just had a fantastic motivational meeting with @SteveShenbaum. His message thru humor and "moving" someone was just PERFECT!! #thankyou

On June 29, Wambach posted another message:

@SteveShenbaum comes in and wows us again. Fortune 500 co, coaches, small biz owners, call this man to get the best out of each other.

Wambach, the No. 2 all-time scorer in women's soccer history, isn't typically that effusive or promotional, so it stood to reason that there was a good story behind Steve Shenbaum's role with the U.S. women's Olympic soccer team (which meets Colombia on Saturday at noon ET on NBCSN). And sure enough, there is.

Over the last 15 years, Shenbaum has led popular team-building and communication-training sessions for some of the biggest names in sports, from the New York Yankees to University of Alabama football and athletes like Sidney Crosby, Alex Smith and Pete Sampras. But Shenbaum had never experienced anything quite like the U.S. women's soccer team.

Shenbaum led two 90-minute sessions -- full 90s, as it were -- with the U.S. women in Sarasota, Fla., and Sandy, Utah, in April and June, and he marvels at the collection of confident, powerful athletes that he has come to know. "This team, they're very expressive," he says. "They've been together a long time, they've had their ups and downs. And I don't want to sound cheesy, but there's just a love for one another that you can sense. I mean, there's a connection in the Yankee locker room, but it's not the same love."

Yet the U.S. was in need of some smiles and laughter in the midst of an arduous preparation process for the Olympics, one that involved multiple training camps, a series of friendlies and long trips all over the world. Through Florida State coach Mark Krikorian, Shenbaum met U.S. goalkeepers coach Paul Rogers, who introduced him to head coach Pia Sundhage. Open to trying something new, Sundhage brought in Shenbaum to work with the U.S. team.

"One thing he told me was, 'I believe in the power of laughter,'" says Sundhage. "Oh, I like that guy. So he came in, and it would be fun. You don't look at that like team bonding ... I love when people laugh, because it's contagious."

When Shenbaum originally met the team, after a long day and a dinner in Sarasota, he had one thing in mind. "The first session we were focused on just the idea of using humor to lift each other up," he says. "It was really basic communication and the power of laughter."

As U.S. forward Alex Morgan puts it, "One of the mottos that he says is: Don't tell me, don't show me, move me. So that's what we've been working on, not to just yell, 'Possession! Possession! Possession! Keep the ball! Keep the ball!' But we're really trying to move people by explaining more in depth: How do you keep the ball? O.K., we'll go back to basics. Be a little more comfortable, post up on the player



Communications coach Steve Shenbaum (left), shown here with Darren McFadden, has worked with some of the biggest names in sports.

AP

for me personally. For other positions it's more about not yelling at a player, not telling the player what to do but showing them, *moving* them. I really enjoyed that."

Like a lot of experienced players, U.S. midfielder Carli Lloyd was skeptical at first. "Sometimes you do these team-building sports-psychology-type exercises, and it almost feels forced," Lloyd says. "For me as a player, I kind of just like to sit down with someone, and that's how I feel I get to know them more, or even rooming with somebody different each time. But Steve was great. He brought something totally different ... He just made everybody laugh. It made people get out of their comfort zones. I hopped up there and did some funny things."

Essentially, Shenbaum had the players engage in improv and role-playing games on stage with and in front of their teammates. One message from the start was simple: Humor is a good thing, as long as it's used in a positive way (self-deprecation or shared amusement) instead of laughing *at* someone.

After winning over the team in the first session, Shenbaum didn't need to start from square one when he met with the U.S. women again outside Salt Lake City before their final pre-Olympic friendly against Canada. "The first session was about self-awareness, so we engaged in humor," says Shenbaum. "The second session I started to focus on different leadership styles and embracing your role on the team."

In one exercise, called Barbecue, Shenbaum asked nine players to put outward-facing numbers on their foreheads with headbands. The numbers ranged from 2 to 9, with higher numbers corresponding to players with greater status and longevity on the team and lower numbers going to the younger and newer players. (Each player could see other people's numbers but not her own. Two players wore number 4.)

The goal of the exercise is for the group to plan a fictitious event. In the U.S. women's team's case, the event wasn't a barbecue but rather the wedding of forward Sydney Leroux's dog, Boss. "The idea is to involve everyone in the planning, but respecting and understanding the various roles you have, based on the number that is on your forehead," Shenbaum says. "But you don't know your number, so at the end of the exercise you line up, high number to low number, and they nailed it. It was great. There were two fours, and they kept switching spots. Finally, they stood behind one another."

"The tieback is to value your role on the team," he continues. "In order to involve the twos, threes and fours, having them act consistently in the activity, on the field and in the locker room is crucial."

In another exercise, Shenbaum had the team play a game called Four Captains. In it, he assigned four different personalities to four people he would then interview. The personalities were The Joker (who wore a 'J' around her neck); The Motivator ('M'); The Challenger ('C') and The Peacemaker ('P'). "The Motivator has to be in motivation mode, The Peacemaker has to be calm and chill, The Challenger has to challenge everything said, and for The Joker everything is light and funny," Shenbaum explains.

With the four players on stage, Shenbaum then interviewed them in "Expert Speaker" mode, in which someone picks a random topic (the crazier the better), and the interviewees answer his questions as if they're experts on that topic. "But they have to play their role," Shenbaum says. "The girls totally bought into it. Then the idea is afterward: What's your leadership style? The strong vibe I got back on this game is that you have to make each one of those styles constructive, not destructive. They can be both."

"Then you drive it home and say, 'O.K., if you're a peacemaker, you can be an awesome peacemaker.' A peacemaker could end up being your best penalty-taker. Then The Challenger, instead of being a Negative Nancy, can be someone who questions maybe when things are out of line to get the team back on track."

In the end, the U.S. players say Shenbaum had a sizable effect on their team. "He's a special guy," says midfielder Heather O'Reilly. "It's about group dynamics, I guess, and getting people's voices heard, everybody on the team ... It brought us together and it moved us. You reflect back on those moments."

Much has been made over the years about the difference between women's and men's sports teams, and while Shenbaum has noticed that, he added they have a lot in common as well. "The women's teams usually are more expressive and respond a little bit more to emotion than the men that I've worked with," he says. "But I will also tell you, this particular team of women has incredibly strong personalities. These are women who are out there to win gold. You could sense the intensity in a good way, sense the hunger and the urgency, and that, mixed with the ability to express themselves and respond to emotion, was really an awesome room in which to teach."

Shenbaum won't be traveling to these Olympics, but his impact is clearly being felt. On the night of one session, Shenbaum got an e-mail from Wambach. "It was just so honest, and so real," he says. He doesn't get e-mails like that from the Yankees players. The way he sees it, in fact, the U.S. women's soccer team is one of a kind.



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