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Eastern block

Russia beats U.S., advances to finals

Latest: Saturday September 30, 2000 12:57 AM

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SYDNEY, Australia (AP) -- It was just like old times, without the punches.

Cuba, which fought Brazil during a semifinal victory in the last Olympics, rallied to beat Brazilians again Thursday 27-29, 25-19, 21-25, 25-19, 15-9 in another semifinal.

Cuba will try for an unprecedented third consecutive gold medal Saturday against Russia, which struggled past the United States in five games.

Even before that outcome, however, the Cubans considered the gold-medal match a formality.

"I feel really happy because we're going to get the gold medal, and it's going to be the third one," said Marlenis Costa.

The same teams met in 1992, with Cuba winning. Russia then slipped to fourth in Atlanta, while the Cubans kept rolling.

"Today our team looks the exact opposite," said Russian coach Nikolai Karpol. "In Barcelona, we had a very experienced team, and the Cubans were very young. Now we are young and they have the experience. It's quite possible that wisdom will conquer."

Led by the 1.93-meter (6-foot-4) Elena Godina and 1.90 (6-3) Liobov Chachkova, the Russians defeated the United States 25-15, 23-25, 25-15, 26-28, 15-8.

The Americans, who weren't favored to make the semifinals much less push the powerful Russians to a fifth game, will play



Danielle Scott (2) and the U.S. couldn't get by Russia in the semifinals. Thomas Coex/AFP

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Brazil for the bronze.

After staging a thrilling comeback to win the fourth game, the U.S. team ran out of steam in the fifth. The Americans actually led 6-5, but the Russians and their unyielding block took over.

On match point, Danielle Scott, the Americans' most imposing player and the best blocker in the tournament, was stuffed by Evgena Artamonova and Natalia Morozova.

The Brazil-Cuba semifinal had the feel of a gold-medal showdown. When it was over, the players quickly shook hands at the net, avoiding a repeat of their angry meeting in Atlanta.

"I think there were problems, but those problems are nonexistent now," Cuban captain Regla Bell said.

Led by 1.90-meter (6-foot-3) blocker Regla Torres, Cuba never trailed in the deciding fifth game, taking some drama out of the finish.

"It's an enormous disappointment to yet again not be able to reach the finals," Brazilian coach Bernado Rezende said. "We fell to what is unquestionably the dominant team of the '90s, and in the year 2000."

The two teams clashed after Cuba's heated five-game semifinal victory in Atlanta. Players sniped at each other during that match and the tension boiled over during the post-match handshake at the net.

Players slapped each other and scuffled again at the tunnel leading to the locker rooms.

They were well-behaved Thursday, although Torres glared at the Brazilians from across the net. Brazil's Leila Barros was particularly focused.

After her stuff block tied the first game at 23-all, Barros jumped and shook her fist. And when a powerful left-handed shot hit a Cuban backcourt player flush on the chin to give Brazil a 27-26 lead, she let out a howl.

Cuba tied it, but Virna Dias drove a shot off the block and Erika Coimbra fired one down the middle for the game.

Brazil took a 16-9 lead in the second game before Cuba went on the

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most impressive run of the tournament. With Torres stuffing everything that came her way, Cuba reeled off nine straight points. After the Brazilians got a point, Cuba ran off four more for a 22-17 lead.

Barros pushed her team even harder, directing the offense and flinging her 1.78-meter (5-foot-10) body at the net to attack balls. Barros' kill gave Brazil a 19-15 lead, and it easily won the third game for a 2-1 advantage.

Cuba squared the match with the help of a 7-0 run in the fourth game.

Brazil's best finish remains the bronze in 1996, which is sure to frustrate volleyball-crazed fans back home who already have watched both their beach volleyball teams settle for silver, then the men's indoor team lose in the quarterfinals.

China ended a disappointing Olympics with a small consolation prize Thursday, taking fifth place in women's volleyball by defeating Germany 25-19, 25-19, 22-25, 25-18.

China, the 1996 silver medalist, began the tournament with a surprising defeat to the United States before losing to Croatia and Brazil, all without putting up much of a fight.

The Chinese bounced back, routing Kenya and Australia to reach the quarterfinals, but then got trounced by Russia. Still, they won four of their last five matches to save face.

"In our earlier matches we did not play very well, so as far as we're concerned, we did well to get fifth in the competition," said captain Sun Yue.

Germany, which stunned Italy in the final match of group play to reach the next round, took sixth to improve on its eighth-place showing in Atlanta.

Croatia finished seventh in its first Olympic women's volleyball tournament by defeating South Korea 25-18, 24-26, 25-22, 25-21.

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