

real SPORTS® e-Zine

Collector's Edition

The Authority in Women's Sports™

8th Annual Most Important Moments in Sports and Athlete of the Year



8th Annual
Most Important Moments in Sports

Keeping Women's Sports in Focus

Best Athlete of 2008

Dara Torres' story is one of perseverance and commitment. At 41, this five time Olympian showed that anything is possible.

3

Most Important Moments in Sports

2008 was a year where we witnessed improbable successes and shattering disappointments, while some dynasties continued to shine.

4 – 10

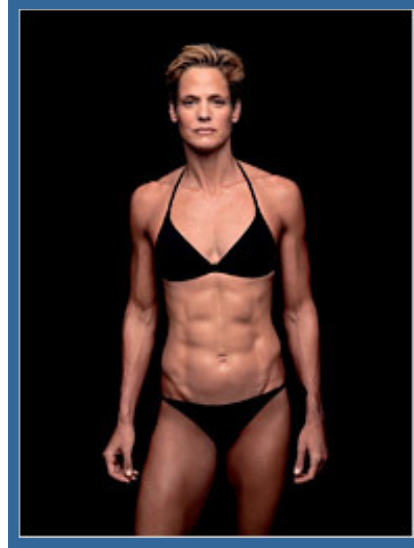
Join the Team

Team REAL SPORTS

11

Best Athlete of 2008

Perseverance and Commitment



This year's REAL SPORTS Best Athlete of the Year award is about recognizing the athlete who best embodies the notion that anything is possible. While many outstanding performers such as Candace Parker may have received more attention, REAL SPORTS Best Athlete of 2008 is U.S. Olympic swimmer Dara Torres.

The 41-year-old mother qualified for her fifth Olympics, becoming the oldest female to compete in Olympic swimming, after winning the 100-meter freestyle at the U.S. Olympic Trials. Torres showed up in Beijing seeking her first individual gold medal, striving toward her goal long after most would have abandoned lesser goals, especially considering she was the oldest member of the U.S. team at the 2000 Sydney Olympics.

Despite qualifying in the 100 meters, Torres decided her best chance for gold was in the 50-meter freestyle, which is traditionally considered a young woman's race. While not the final outcome she had hoped for — Torres missed out on gold by the same margin by which Michael Phelps won his closest race — the silver medal in the 50 meters marked Torres' fourth individual medal and 12th medal overall. Torres won her first medal at the 1984 Los Angeles Games, a year before Phelps was born. Torres' story is one of perseverance and commitment, and she showed that anything is possible by competing on the greatest athletic stage at age 41. And she looks amazing with her six-pack abs.

Athlete of the Year and Most Important Moments in Sports selections are determined by REAL SPORTS Editorial Board.

8th Annual

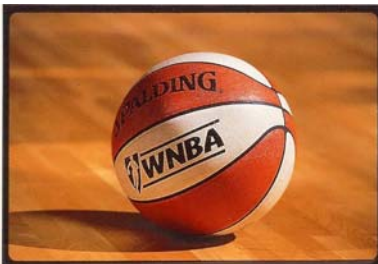
Most Important Moments in Sports

#10 Sports, Politics and the Media

U.S. athletes accomplished numerous significant feats at the 2008 Summer Games in Beijing. An overflow of airtime was justifiably accorded to swimmer Michael Phelps for his record-breaking eighth gold medal in a single Olympics. The men's team basked in the limelight as it recaptured its place atop the totem pole of men's basketball. Thus it was quite a boon to see how much prime-time coverage Kerri Walsh and Misty May-Treanor received for the one gold they brought home, becoming the first back-to-back champions in women's beach volleyball.

As is often the case with women's sports, however, one is left to wonder about the many subplots that accompanied their accomplishment and what impact those subplots may have had on the amount of exposure that Walsh and May-Treanor received. Did their bikini uniforms play a role? Walsh and May-Treanor "buddying up" with the men's basketball team may have helped to significantly elevate their media presence. What about President George W. Bush's tap of May-Treanor's backside? She grabbed the microphone at one point to thank Bush for his efforts in leading the country, but would the coverage of this tandem have increased tenfold had she chosen to criticize instead of laud his initiatives?

Whatever the case, this was a special story, and we can be thankful it received as much positive exposure as it did. May-Treanor was playing in honor of her mother's memory once again, and she continued the tradition she started in the 2004 Games by sprinkling some of her mother's ashes on the court after the gold-medal game. And now that Walsh is pregnant, the words that these two repeatedly offered during the Games about wanting to go out on top and spend more time with their families may finally be too appealing to resist.



#9 No Shock – Detroit Takes Title

The Detroit Shock may be emerging as the model franchise for the WNBA. The Motor City squad completed its third league conquest in six years this past October, with a three-game sweep of the San Antonio Silver Stars. Katie Smith was named Finals

MVP following a dominant performance enroute to her second WNBA championship (both with Detroit).

Smith has demonstrated an ability to thrive under the guidance of Strong male coaches. Two-time NBA champion Bill Laimbeer played Smith nearly every minute of the Finals and lavished praise on his MVP. “congratulate Katie Smith,” said Laimbeer. “I don’t give her all the credit that she deserves throughout the course of the year, and she really showed it.” Before joining the WNBA, Smith had won two championships with the American Basketball League’s Columbus Quest under coach Brian Agler. As if Smith’s career needed any extra icing, she was a member of the women’s gold medal basketball team at the 2008 Olympics, coached by Anne Donovan, a three-time Olympian and former coach of the WNBA’s Seattle Storm.



#8 Comeback of the Year

Perhaps the world has not passed up U.S. soccer. If there were comeback-team awards given out by the U.S. Olympic Committee, our pick would be the U.S. national soccer team. 2008 proved to be a banner year for the squad as a new coach led it to victories in the Four Nations Tournament in China in January, the Algarve Cup in Portugal in March, the CONCACAF Olympic Qualifying Tournament in Mexico in April and the Peace Queen Cup in South Korea in June — all leading up to the Olympic Games in August. The stage was set in Beijing for Pia Sundhage, the 48-year-old Swede hired in late 2007 to restore the team’s winning ways, to establish her legacy.

Carli Lloyd’s 96th-minute strike in overtime following a scoreless regulation in the finals against Brazil afforded redemption for the national team as well as goalkeeper Hope Solo. The goalie had been shunned by, and isolated from, the team during the 2006 World Cup following postgame comments in which she criticized coach Greg Ryan and said the team would have been better suited with her in goal instead of Brianna Scurry. Solo made several key saves during the final match but none bigger than her 72nd-minute, one-handed stuff from point-blank range against FIFA Women’s World Player of the Year Marta.

In the wake of the disastrous coaching that had recently befallen the national team, the decision to look internationally is looking especially shrewd. Sundhage, having previously coached the Boston Breakers in the Women’s United Soccer Association, came in with a frame of reference to U.S. soccer talent, and her emphasis on a possession game should serve the team well in the future as its young midfielders continue to develop. Soccer fans can also look forward to the 2009 debut of a new league — Women’s Professional Soccer.

#7 *Smiling Faces*

Joining Mary Lou Retton and Shannon Miller as the only U.S. gymnasts to capture five medals in a single Olympic Games, Nastia Liukin brought home five, including the gold for the all-around competition, from Beijing. She also became only the third U.S. gymnast to win the all-around title.

Liukin's dominance did not surprise those who know the sport intimately. Before the Olympics, Liukin had recorded eight first-place finishes, six second-place showings, and two thirds during three national and international competitions. Her mother and father were champion Soviet gymnasts, including a gold medal for father, Valeri, in the 1988 Seoul Games.

An analysis of the hype surrounding the U.S. team prior to Beijing, however, would suggest Liukin's performance came out of nowhere. Images of teammate Shawn Johnson were plastered everywhere, from billboards to cereal boxes. While taking nothing away from Johnson's second-place finish in the all-around, and her gold medal in the balance beam, the interesting angle to consider is how she was basically signed up to drive and be the face of the team. Had she succeeded to the degree that Liukin did, she would undoubtedly have been the recipient of a media bonanza unlike any Liukin has experienced. This raises the issue once again of how corporate endorsements tend to favor the "All-American girl" as opposed to a young woman with a serious demeanor who is focused on her craft.



#6 *Russian Dominance*

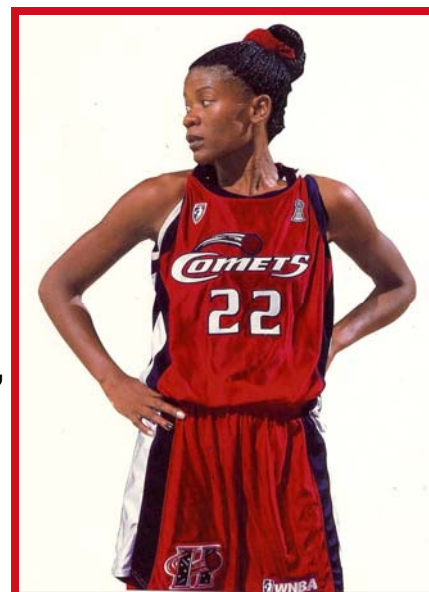
The women's singles tennis event proved notable for being one of only two Olympics — and the first since 1908 — in which all medalists were from the same country. Elena Dementieva took her place atop the all-Russian podium, and Dinara Safina (silver medal) and Vera Zvonareva (bronze medal) stood proudly by her side.

Despite their singles victories, however, the Russian women failed to advance past the quarterfinals of the doubles. Nonetheless, Americans Venus and Serena Williams provided a bright spot for fans of the sport with their inspired performance en route to capturing gold in the doubles tourney.



#5 Lost in Space

Although times have been much brighter so far in this year's countdown compared to 2007, moment No. 5 was truly devastating. One year after Leslie Alexander, owner of the NBA's Houston Rockets, sold the Houston NBA and WNBA teams to Hilton Koch, WNBA President Donna Orender found herself meeting with influential members of the Houston community



in search of a viable ownership group to keep the team afloat. Alas, even after the WNBA took over the team from Koch, Orender eventually raised the white flag after being unable find owners anywhere in the state, and the Comets officially came to an end with the dispersal draft on Dec. 8.

As eulogized in the WNBA's official press release: "For the league's first half-decade, the Houston Comets were synonymous with the WNBA. During that period, all the Comets did was win the first four WNBA championships, three of the first four MVP awards and post a league-record .900 winning percentage (going 27-3 in 1998) that is unlikely to be threatened any time soon."

For anyone who believes women's sports have attained a solid footing in this country, this is your wake-up call. It is dumbfounding that we cannot keep thriving, not to mention alive, a franchise that was possibly the most dominant in American professional sports in its era. Your New Year's call to action if you want to see women's professional sports survive during this economic downturn is to take action — pick a team and support it.

#4 Repeats

Our first repeat moment from 2007 comes courtesy of the repeat champions. Pat Summit's Tennessee Lady Vols toppled Stanford 64-48 to cap an impressive run through the playoffs bracket. The Lady Vols exposed Stanford's inability to handle the full-court press en route to soundly defeating a team that had consistently impressed throughout the tournament under the leadership of guard Candice Wiggins, the Wade Trophy Player of the Year.

All-American Candace Parker was the engine powering the Tennessee train throughout the tourney, becoming the fourth player to win back-to-back Most Outstanding Player honors in the Final Four. In case anyone thinks she may have done it all by herself, she and the Lady Vols made it to the final only thanks to Alexis Hornbuckle's last-second put-back to edge Louisiana States 47-46 in the semifinals.

Teamwork can only take a program so far. Interestingly enough, with Parker having taken her game to the WNBA's Los Angeles Sparks (Hornbuckle plays for the champion Detroit Shock), Tennessee's record run of 211 straight weeks in the top 10 ended in mid-December of the 2008-2009 campaign.

History says it won't take Summit long to find her next marquee attraction and climb back to the top, and given Tennessee's overtime victory against Stanford on Dec. 21, 2008, we expect her to be back in the top 10 within a week.



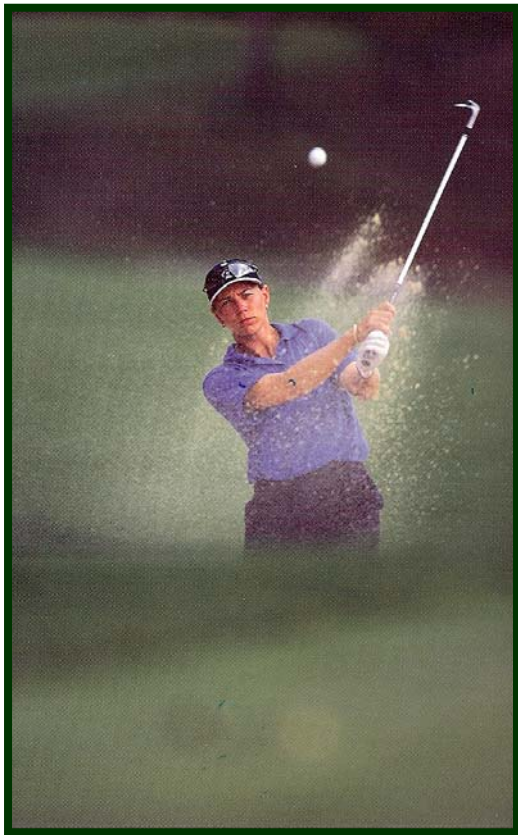
#3 Delivering when it counts

American Stephanie Brown Trafton shocked the track-and-field community by coming away with a surprise gold medal in the discus in the Beijing Games. It was the first time an American woman had won the event since 1932.

Critics pointed out that Brown Trafton's winning distance was the shortest since the 1968 Mexico City Games. Others picked apart the competition she faced and the conditions in the Bird's Nest, where she competed. But the significance of Brown Trafton's victory didn't lie in its relation to the record books. This was one of those statements about how, when it's all the line, can you block out everything and deliver? After an underwhelming performance at the 2004 Olympics in Athens, in which she barely qualified and failed to medal, Brown Trafton continued to hone her skills all while holding down a full-time job and a marriage. She made a great throw at a crucial moment and came away an Olympic champion.

#2 Bidding adieu

She became the first woman to play in a PGA Tour Event since Babe Didrikson Zaharias in 1945, when she teed it up at the Colonial in 2003; shot an LPGA record 59 at Phoenix's Moon Valley in 2001; won 10 major championships, including a career Grand Slam; was the first woman in



LPGA history to surpass \$22 million in career earnings; and was inducted into the LPGA Tour and World Golf Halls of Fame while she was still playing.

By now it's clear who is being described above. But what was moment No .2? Annika Sorenstam bidding adieu to the game she forever changed. After announcing in May that 2008 would be her final year on tour, Sorenstam continued to play brilliantly and received standing ovations at each 18th fairway and green of every tournament on her farewell tour.

This recognition of her dominance stems from the strong etiquette and sense of history LPGA fans have long displayed. While the numbers obviously testify to Sorenstam's degree of success, her true impact on the game is immeasurable. Nancy Lopez served as the sport's flag bearer for years, but then the LPGA was quieter for quite some time after her departure. Sorenstam became someone for fans to root for who was true to her sport.

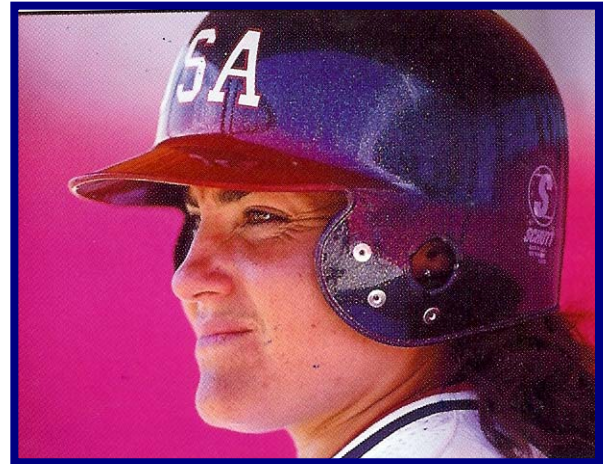
While some questioned the LPGA's decision to administer the random drug test that she drew following her final putt at the ADT Championship in November, it served as a testament to what makes Sorenstam so great. Athletes are not above the law, as evidenced by how track-and-field star Marion Jones was stripped of her medals and sent to prison after admitting to doping after lying about it, but here in Sorenstam was someone who achieved what she did by means of having a tremendous regimen, lifting weights and putting in the time to be at her physical and mental best. Being given (and passing) a random drug test on the final day was not disrespectful, but instead a final indicator that she was someone to root for. Congratulations to this legend on a spectacular career.

#1 *IOC action should be disqualified*

The most important moment in sports this year was an intersection of confusion. First, the International Olympic Committee dropped baseball from its roster of events starting with the 2012 London Olympics. Against the outcry of many fans, the IOC defended its decision with the

position that baseball federations, unlike, say, men's basketball and the NBA, are not sending their best players, and thus the lack of top competition does not meet Olympic standards. Even more stunning, however, was the IOC's next addendum to that announcement that softball was getting the heave-ho, too.

But softball has always sent its best players, including the Jennie Finches and Cat Ostermans, since it was instituted for the 1996 Atlanta Games. Unable to deflect this entirely credible rebuttal, the IOC shifted gears, claiming the reason behind softball's ousting was that the U.S. team was just too dominant. While no fans wanted to see softball go, it was tougher to argue with this rationale, since the United States had won a gold medal at every opportunity.



Lisa Fernandez has been an integral part of Team USA – demonstrating the commitment to sending the best to every event.



Cat Osterman, one of many talents developed during the Olympic participation era.

And then the biggest stunner of them: Japan beat the heralded U.S. dynasty 3-1 in the gold-medal game in Beijing. The silver lining in the U.S. team's silver medal is that it proves other countries are catching up and real competition at the highest level does exist. It's too late to get softball reinstated for the London Games, but many people are hard at work trying to accomplish this feat for the 2016 Olympics (the host city will be announced in 2009). We at REAL SPORTS applaud their efforts and believe it is imperative to keep softball on the minds of sports fans and in the lives of young girls. [RS]

Selections by REAL SPORTS™ editorial board. Moments written by Patrick Love. Copy edited by La Tricia Ransom. I/T support by Asa Enocson. © 2008 All Rights Reserved. Amy Love.

Join the TEAM—Team REAL SPORTS that is!

Your TEAM Membership Benefits:

Receive the EXCLUSIVE TEAM REAL SPORTS T-Shirt

Carry your own REAL SPORTS,
The Authority in Women's Sports,
membership card

Receive special advance announcements
about REAL SPORTS Collector's Editions

Be Part of Changing Women's Sports Coverage.

Join today for just \$9.95, includes s&h.

To join the team, contact us at:

FAN@realsportsmag.com

