

## NWSL

## Sophia Smith, Marissa Everett emerging at right time for Thorns

BY TYLER TACHMAN

The Portland Thorns took full possession of first place in the NWSL standings last weekend after defeating the Orlando Pride 2-1 in Providence Park. The victory was, in large part, a result of the offensive firepower provided by Sophia Smith and Marissa Everett.

The duo's offensive emergence might have seemed unlikely just a few months ago.

Smith was the first to make her mark in the 26th minute, curling a shot inside the near post and past the goalkeeper to put the Thorns up 1-0.

"The feeling when I struck it was just, 'Don't overthink it, you know how to do this, you know how to score goals,' and I just felt free," Smith said.

Then in the 58th minute, it was Everett's turn. Teammate Meghan Klingenberg chipped in a cross from outside the box. Everett tracked the trajectory perfectly, crashing into the box from the right flank. She flicked her head right as the ball dropped in front of her and sent it toward the corner of the

net as she bellyflopped onto the turf. The goalkeeper dove, getting a finger on the ball, but not enough to keep it from careening into the goal.

Everett's first goal of the season put the Thorns up 2-0.

"Me and Kling have been working on that ball, so to finally get one felt really good," Everett said.

It wound up a necessary cushion after the Thorns conceded a goal in extra time.

Smith and Everett have taken different paths in their respective careers, but the Thorns needed both of them to pull out the win last weekend.

Smith is the more widely known of the two. She was a phenom at Stanford and helped lead the team to a national championship as a sophomore in 2019. The Thorns selected Smith as the No. 1 pick in the 2020 NWSL draft. Then 19, she was regarded as a future star in the league.

But since then, she hasn't been able to fully gain her footing for a variety of reasons. She was out for the Challenge Cup last July while dealing with a



Portland Thorns' Sophia Smith launches a shot against the Orlando Pride in an NWSL match on Sunday in Portland.

knee injury and appeared in four matches during 2020.

This season, even though she's notched three goals, Smith missed more time while at U.S. women's national team camp. Then in June, she was

out briefly due to undisclosed injuries she picked up during a road trip.

"There's not a big amount of training times and games that we've had with her because of the constant in and out of

national team camp," Thorns coach Mark Parsons said.

Then there's Everett, who played four seasons at Oregon, where she finished her career ranked among the top 10 in all-time program assists, goals, points and shots.

In 2019, she went undrafted, but the Thorns quickly decided to bring her in.

Over the last three years, Everett has appeared in just 17 matches. It's largely because the Thorns are consistently loaded with star midfielders and Everett has been stuck behind them on the depth chart.

"It's hard when Lindsey Horan, Crystal Dunn, Christine Sinclair, Rocky Rodriguez are on your team, but you know that you're not going to play a lot," Parsons said. "That can be tough."

Still, Parsons has watched Everett pour herself into every aspect of the game. She's built her fitness and worked on her mental toughness. She also displays a glowing "enjoyment for the game," Parsons said.

And now, more than ever, the Thorns need both Smith

and Everett to be at their best. Five Thorns, including Dunn, Horan and Sinclair, are competing in the Tokyo Olympics and will be away from the club for the foreseeable future.

Smith was a part of the group vying for a bid on the U.S. Olympic team earlier this year, but was ultimately turned away. Despite that, Parsons said Smith has remained "present" and "focused on growing and improving." This stretch will also allow for Smith to spend more time in one place, giving her the chance to focus even more on her development.

"The heartbreak is real, but the long-term goal is just to be the best player," Parsons said.

With the Olympic players gone, Everett will have a bigger role in the Thorns' attack. She has played in each of the Thorns' last four matches, including three starts. Facing the Houston Dash on the road Saturday, the Thorns likely need both Smith and Everett again.

"Everyone is working and investing," Parsons said. "Because of that, players like Marissa and Sophia can do their job."

## Olympics

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But there she was at the center of the stage when a staircase emerged, the cauldron opened atop a peak inspired by Mount Fuji and Osaka ascended with the Olympic and Japanese flags blowing in the breeze off to her left. She dipped the flame in, the cauldron ignited and fireworks filled the sky.

"Undoubtedly the greatest athletic achievement and honor I will ever have in my life," Osaka wrote on Instagram next to a picture of her smiling while holding the flame. "I have no words to describe the feelings I have right now, but I do know I am currently filled with gratefulness and thankfulness."

It capped quite a series of events over the past two months for the

23-year-old Osaka.

Going into the French Open in late May, Osaka — who is ranked No. 2 — announced she wouldn't speak to reporters at the tournament, saying those interactions create doubts for her.

Then, after her first-round victory, she skipped the mandatory news conference.

Osaka was fined \$15,000 and — surprisingly — publicly reprimanded by those in charge of Grand Slam tournaments, who said she could be suspended if she kept avoiding the media.

The next day, Osaka withdrew from Roland Garros entirely to take a mental health break, revealing she has dealt with depression.

She sat out Wimbledon, too. So the Tokyo Games mark her return to competition.

"The Olympics are a special time, when the world comes together to celebrate sports. I am looking forward most to being with the athletes that had waited and trained for over 10 years, for celebrating a very hard year (2020) and having that happen in Japan makes it that much more special," Osaka wrote in an email interview when she was selected as the 2020 AP Female Athlete of the Year. "It's a special and beautiful country filled with culture, history and beauty. I cannot be more excited."

There was a big hint that Osaka might have an important role in the ceremony when her opening Olympic tennis match was pushed back from Saturday to Sunday without an explanation earlier in the day.

She was originally scheduled to play 52nd-ranked Zheng Saisai of China in the very first match of the

Games on center court Saturday morning. But clearly by lighting the flame as midnight approached, she wouldn't have had enough rest for an early morning match.

Osaka became the first tennis player to light the Olympic cauldron. She's also one of the few active athletes to be given the honor. Australian sprinter Cathy Freeman lit the cauldron for the 2000 Sydney Games and went on to win gold in the 400 meters.

Osaka — along with top-ranked Ash Barty — is a favorite to win the women's singles title in a tennis tournament that also features Novak Djokovic aiming to become the first man to win a Golden Slam by holding all four Grand Slam trophies and Olympic gold in the same year.

Whatever the final results on the court, Osaka has already become part of Olympic history.



Kiichiro Sato/AP

Naomi Osaka practices ahead of the 2020 Summer Olympics at Ariake Tennis Center Monday in Tokyo.

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