



SHE CAME TO PLAY

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Hucles retires at the top of her game

by Dan Lauletta - Special to womensprosoccer.com
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Angela Hucles, age 31 and playing at the top levels of women's soccer, recently announced that she's decided to end her playing career.

In a sudden announcement of a well thought out decision, Angela Hucles stunned her teammates and fans last week by announcing her retirement from soccer. The retirement was effective immediately, so the U.S. National Team left for Germany without Hucles, who had been named to the squad for Thursday's friendly in Augsburg, Germany.

"I think the best comment came from Pia (Sundhage, U.S. National Team head coach)," Hucles said, recalling the surprise reaction from most people she told. "When I told her and she at first said, 'oh no,' but then halfway through the conversation she said, 'this is really cool.' Most of the time when she's talking to players it's because of an injury or a performance that she wasn't pleased with. For me to be able to share with her that I reached all my goals and my dreams and I'm just moving on, she thought that was really cool."

And there, in a nutshell, is why Angela Hucles, at age 31 and playing at the top levels of women's soccer, decided to end her playing career.

"It's obviously hard as a professional athlete to know when it's time to stop. For me, I felt that I've accomplished everything I've wanted to in the sport of soccer as a player," she said in a recent interview. "Coming off the last Olympics as well as being able to help start a brand new league in this country for women, those were the last kind of final pieces that I was looking for."

Hucles's retirement blindsided most of the soccer community, especially since she participated in a National Team camp in September and was considered a lynchpin in the midfield heading towards the 2011 World Cup and 2012 Olympics. But the decision was not sudden at all. Blessed with the innate acceptance that athletic careers are not forever, Hucles began plotting her exit several years ago. The only question was when exactly she would call it a career.

"It's something that I've definitely been thinking about over the years. The way my passions and desire for the game are right now, I felt this was the best time for me to step aside. It was not waking up one morning and deciding."

Hucles spent the decade of the 2000s as a quiet rock on the National Team and played all four seasons for the Boston Breakers—three in the WUSA and 2009 in the inaugural WPS season. Her career arc has been the product of talent and hard work with a little bit of luck sprinkled in. She was a star at Virginia where she scored 17 goals as a freshman and graduated as the school's all-time leading scorer. Her May 2000 graduation coincided with the launch of WUSA the following spring. In December 2000 the Breakers made Hucles their 12th—yes 12th—round selection. There were 92 players taken ahead of Hucles.

"That was just such a tremendous opportunity for someone like myself," Hucles said of the WUSA, which she used as a springboard onto the National Team. "It helped elevate my career and get an invitation in with the U.S. team. I know Shannon Boxx credits the WUSA with helping her career on the National Team and Abby

Wambach as well."

Hucles made her National Team debut in April 2002 and has been a fixture ever since. She won gold medals at the 2004 and 2008 Olympics and only injuries kept her from seeing action at World Cups in 2003 and 2007.

"I think that's what WPS will do as well," she said. "It will offer games for players in this country to be seen by the National Team. The coach will be able to see different players playing against international stars and see how they handle situations on the field."

Currently in Germany with the team is Ella Masar, a player with extensive U-23 experience but no caps with the full team. Brittany Klein and Meghan Schnur participated in last month's camp but were not chosen for the Germany match. They all got as far as they have through WPS, and they all have a long way to match Hucles, whose finest hours came last summer in China where she tallied a team-best four goals.

"This last Olympics was very special to me both as an individual and as part of the team," she said. Among Hucles' goals during the tournament was the only regulation strike in the quarterfinals against Canada, a match the U.S. eventually won in extra time. Three days later against Japan, the U.S. was trailing near halftime when Hucles scored the equalizer. She later added the backbreaker in what was a 4-2 semifinal victory.

Less than a month after capturing her second gold medal, Hucles became part of WPS. Instead of waiting while 92 other players were drafted as she had done eight years earlier, this time around Hucles was center stage as one of 21 players from the National Team pool allocated to the clubs during a gala event in New York City.

"I definitely wanted to be a part of the league and help get it started," Hucles said. "I definitely foresee many more years for WPS and I look forward to rooting them on and maybe helping out in a different capacity."

In the days after her retirement, Hucles immediately made good on her word to root the league on when she bought 2010 Breakers season tickets. She said she will "still be looking for wins, just in a different way," in 2010. Asked if she would have hung on to her career another year had WPS been forced to delay its launch, she said the question was impossible to answer.

Season tickets aside, Hucles will spend the next days and weeks figuring out what else to do with her life. She put 24 years of her life into soccer, and spent the last several mulling over the appropriate time to walk away, but she is adamant about not knowing what lies ahead.

"I would love to get into something completely different that is not soccer related. At the same time, I do see myself involved in some capacity. But I think in terms of what I'm looking to do kind of long term, it probably won't have anything to do with soccer.

"This wasn't a decision to leave soccer for something else. I'm leaving soccer because I've given it all I have."

