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## Q-C native earns starting goalie spot for U.S. Olympic water polo squad

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Brandon Brooks is a water polo pool shark.

Widely regarded as the best water polo goalie in the country, the 23-year-old from Rock Island who grew up in Honolulu, Hawaii, officially was selected as the starting goalie for the United States Olympic water polo squad June 3.

With long arms and deceptive quickness around the cage, the cagey keeper first made a splash at UCLA as a top-notch goalie for four sensational seasons.

Last summer in the FINA World Championships in Barcelona, Spain, Brooks made international waves as a gifted goalie despite the fact that the United States finished sixth out of 16 teams with a 3-2-1 record. He started all six games of the championships, and averaged an astounding 10.3 saves per contest. Brooks compiled 11 saves in a 5-5 tie with powerhouse Serbia-Montenegro, and 14 saves in a 4-3 defeat to Greece in the quarterfinals.

Continuing to elevate his game and continuing to attract increasing attention, Brooks then helped direct the United States to a first-place finish and 10-0 mark in the Pan American Games in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. The stopper averaged 5.9 saves per game, and notched five saves in the first quarter of a pool-play match against Brazil.

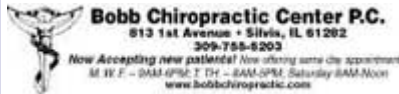
Gaining momentum and gaining confidence, Brooks helped guide the United States to a third-place finish in the FINA World League Super Finals in New York. Brooks then was heralded as the outstanding goalkeeper of the 2003 American Water Polo League finals and Premier League championships. Moreover, Brooks helped lead Los Angeles to a top finish at the Premier League finals in the water polo club's first year of existence.

With such a steady stream of success and deluge of accolades, Brooks was featured on the cover of a recent edition of "USA Water Polo The Magazine." In a three-page article, water polo aficionados boldly proclaimed Brooks as "The last line of defense" because of his defensive prowess, and ability to pass the ball deep into the United States' counter-attack.

"A lot of this attention seems overwhelming at times," Brooks said. "I

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have played water polo for a lot of years because I love it, but this last year, has been an incredible ride. I never could have imagined or dreamed that all of this would happen for me when I first started playing."

Since Brooks started playing water polo in the seventh grade, he has enjoyed considerable success. After a spectacular prep career at Punahou High School in Honolulu, Brooks rewrote the water polo record books at UCLA.

Besides propelling the Bruins to national water polo titles in 1999 and 2000, Brooks concluded his phenomenal collegiate career with a school-record 701 saves. UCLA finished second in the nation in 2001, and third in 2002.

A four-time All-American selection, Brooks collected five MVP awards at national tournaments and amassed 227 saves as a senior. For his amazing accomplishments, Brooks will be inducted into the UCLA Hall of Fame this fall.

When Brooks eclipsed the school save mark of 694, the contest was stopped at UCLA and he was awarded the game ball.

"That was an unforgettable moment I will always cherish," said Brooks, who will graduate from UCLA next May with a degree in sociology. "Although I played four years of water polo at UCLA, I still have another year of academic work to do.

"I decided last September to take a year off from school so I could devote all my attention to training for the Olympics," added Brooks, who is an academic All-American. This fall when I go back to UCLA, I also will be an assistant water polo coach. There is a family atmosphere at UCLA that has helped me grow as a person and athlete."

Although Brooks officially was selected to the United States water polo team two months ago, he started training for the Olympics three years ago.

"To make the United States Olympic team, you basically have to try out for three years or more," said Brooks, who has ventured to 25 countries in five continents playing water polo. "There are 13 people on Team USA, and two alternates. However, the selection process for our squad started in 2001 with about 40 candidates. We travel around the world during the summer, and play in a lot of tournaments. Slowly but steadily, the number of potential picks for the team dwindles as time goes on."

There are two active goalies on the United States Olympic squad, and Brooks first made a move toward taking the starting spot three years ago when he was recognized as the top junior national goalie in the world. Brooks was a very effective reserve goalie for the U.S. National squad at the 2002 world tournament in Hungary, and played a key role in helping the team finish first.

"Our biggest strengths are defense and counter-attacks," Brooks said. "The U.S. hasn't won in the Olympics in awhile, but we're confident that we've put ourselves in a position to succeed. Winning it all is a very attainable goal for us."

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