

Touzinsky relishes volleyball gold



USA's Ryan Millar and St. Louisan Scott Touzinsky (right) hug after beating Brazil for the gold medal. (Koji Sasahara/AP)

By **Vahe Gregorian**

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BEIJING — Engulfed in emotion after the U.S. men's volleyball team won a gold medal at the Beijing Olympics on Sunday, Scott Touzinsky scrambled around the Capital Gymnasium floor, hugging teammates and screaming. Then he hurried to his wife, Angel, in the stands.

"I've never seen him cry that hard," she said. "Not even on our wedding day."

As she told him she loved him over and over, he only gushed more, saying, "Thanks for always sticking by me, and for being the best wife ever."

In the whirlwind, he thought all at once of his parents and his brothers and the knee injury he suffered four years ago and the hundreds of hours he served and retrieved balls in their back yard in Oakville and his time at Vianney and of the woman who wanted him to join the volleyball team she was starting when he was between second and third grade.

"Donna Mayer —I love you!" said Touzinsky, whose mother had to bribe him with a new pair of sneakers to get him to try the game.

Long after the 20-25, 25-22, 25-21, 25-23 victory over Brazil, the 26-year-old Vianney graduate savored the scene as he stood with a gold medal dangling from his neck.

While he wasn't planning to sleep in it Sunday, he thought he might when he returned to California on Monday and didn't think it would come off much for the foreseeable future.

"I think I'll probably wear it to church when I get home," said Touzinsky, who along with East St. Louis High's Dawn Harper and Nerinx Hall's Lori Chalupny became the third St. Louis-area athlete to win gold in Beijing. "I think I'll probably wear it everywhere I can."

Goofing for a team photo moments before, Touzinsky and his teammates had the medals between their teeth.

"I wanted to bite right through it, and cherish it, you know?" said Touzinsky, who suggested the medal might help him get a few more people to attend the volleyball camps he wants to resume holding in St. Louis. "It tasted great. It feels great. It's nice and heavy. And not a lot of people got them."

In his euphoria, it mattered not one wit that Touzinsky had played sparingly in the team's 8-0 march to its first gold since the 1988 Seoul Olympics and not at all on Sunday.

With two years on the roster, he was a relative newcomer on a veteran team, whose own "triumphs and tragedies" were part of his emotions.

This was about family, concepts dear to Touzinsky to begin with and reinforced by the approach of coach Hugh McCutcheon, concepts that left him thinking of the six alternates who weren't able to accompany the 12 here.

"I'll make sure right when I get back that they get to put on the medal," he said,

adding, "We're all in it together."

The togetherness seemed amplified by the tragedy that befell McCutcheon's family two weeks ago, when his father-in-law was murdered and mother-in-law seriously injured in a stabbing incident at a Beijing landmark. The assailant jumped to his death.

McCutcheon missed the first three games of the Olympics before returning to the team he had taken over four years ago.

"Obviously, this isn't going to bring (McCutcheon's father-in-law) back," Touzinsky said. "But hopefully it can give them a little bit of strength to keep on going, along with their lives and keep his memory alive."

After the match, Touzinsky said, McCutcheon was smiling for the first time in days.

"And it was a beautiful thing to see," he said.

The smile isn't likely to soon leave the face of Touzinsky, who in between the end of the match and the medal ceremony had called his parents, Anne and Charles. They had been in Beijing but returned before the medal rounds.

Normally, when he rings, the parent who answers calls the other to get on another line and Scott waits for both to be on lines before he delivers news.

"I couldn't this time," he said, "It was, 'Mom — we won. I'm a gold medalist.'"

He expected soon to call older brothers Chip and Keith, who he said always stuck with him even if they were inclined to such childhood acts as "throwing me down the stairs in a laundry basket."

"Chip is going to go crazy like he always does and ask me about 5,000 questions — that's a good thing," he said. "He's going to be crying, I know, and I'm just going to say I love him ..."

"It's going to be great to show them this gold medal. I'll let them wear it and do

whatever they want to it."

That chance will come in early September, when Touzinsky returns to St. Louis for about 10 days. He will rejoice not only in the achievement but in having the chance to share it and thank those who supported him all along — including through bleak moments such as the knee injury four years ago that left him wondering whether he would ever be able to play again.

"When I was going through rehab, I thought of this moment maybe happening — and it did," said Touzinsky, adding, "It's something you always dream of. But until it actually happens ... that's why I'm crying right now."