

After 19 years, Christine Sinclair is on the verge of making history

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Canada's Christine Sinclair is four goals away from eclipsing American Abby Wambach's all-time international goals record. (Quinn Rooney/Getty Images)

She was 16 years old when the journey began and the numbers started to count. Little did she know she was on her way to becoming the greatest goal scorer in international soccer history.

That's what's on the horizon for Canadian Christine Sinclair, who heads into the 2019 World Cup four goals shy of becoming the all-time leader — man or woman.

Her first international goal came 19 years ago. It was the 2000 Algarve Cup in Portugal, and Sinclair was making her debut for Canada's senior team. She scored her first goal against Norway on March 14, and then scored two more over the course of the tournament.

"I remember at the time it was [American] Mia Hamm's record and thinking, 'That's impossible. Nobody is going to get near that,'" Sinclair told CBC Sports.

Now, she's entering the World Cup with 181 career goals and is chasing retired American Abby Wambach, who currently holds the record with 184. The tournament starts on Friday in France. Canada, which begins play on Monday in Montpellier against Cameroon, is also in a group with New Zealand and the Netherlands.

Remembering the great goals

Sinclair's had a lifetime worth of memorable goals.

Numbers 141, 142 and 143 — the hat trick at Old Trafford against the United States during the semifinals of the 2012 London Olympics — were scored under the highest pressure. The game ended in a controversial loss for Canada, but Sinclair's performance influenced a new generation of aspiring young players.

"The impact those had on women's soccer in our country, that's pretty cool," said Sinclair.

Number 154, the game-winning penalty kick over China in the dying seconds of Canada's 2015 World Cup opener in Edmonton, holds a special place for Sinclair.

"I've been practising my whole life for that moment," she said at the time.

Number 165, the goal in the 52nd minute that gave Canada its bronze-medal win over the hometown Brazilians at the 2016 Rio Olympics, only added to Sinclair's legend.

"I was not going to leave this tournament without a medal around my neck," a tearful Sinclair said after the match.

Focused on winning

Sinclair is humble, team-oriented and determined. But above all else, she wants to win.

Sinclair said it herself when asked about possibly breaking the record on a stage such as the World Cup.

Instead of focusing on Wambach's mark, Sinclair is on a different mission.

"We're going there to win it," she said.

John Herdman, who coached the Canadian superstar from 2011 to 2018, said her legacy is more about inspiring young people across the country than anything else.

"I don't think she's ever played the game for records and adulation. She just enjoys it. She loves putting on that red shirt," he said. "She's set the bar for another Canadian kid to go on and break her record, because I think everyone in Canada knows it's achievable."

And she's not just inspiring to a generation of kids across the Great White North, but to her teammates as well. While these Canadian players are trying not to pile on the pressure — they're keeping it light-hearted ahead of the tournament — they also can't help but be proud of what their captain is on the verge of accomplishing.

Diana Matheson has been a teammate of Sinclair's since 2003, and has been looking up to her ever since.

"It's kind of cliched, but it really has been just a privilege to play with her," said Matheson. "She's a humble, amazing person with a pretty wicked sense of humour that if you're around her all the time, you get to enjoy."

And, as evidenced by her years of filling the net, Sinclair knows what to do once she gets into scoring position.

"If you get her the ball in the box, she's going to score," said Matheson.

The chase for more

Her latest goal, No. 181, came at BMO Field in Toronto last month during a friendly against Mexico. Canada won the match 3-0.

The goal was just like the scenario Matheson had described. Sinclair was composed and when she got the ball on her foot, clinical.

Canada blanks Mexico 3-0 in friendly, Christine Sinclair records goal No. 181 of her career.
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Sinclair's journey has been 19 years in the making.

She's won two Olympic bronze medals. She's a 14-time winner of Soccer Canada's Player of the Year award. In 2012, she won the Lou Marsh Trophy as Canada's top athlete.

Sinclair would love to add World Cup champion to the list.

"Being a top-five team in the world, a No. 1 seed in our group. We're going there to try and bring home the trophy," she said.

And if she just so happens to score four times during the tournament, she'll cement her legend as one of the best soccer players ever, and the greatest international goal scorer of all time.