

Women's World Cup

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
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It was a remarkable performance. Two goals in five minutes, four goals in sixteen minutes. Five overall in a 5-2 World Cup Victory in front of over 53,000 fans in Vancouver. According to NPR early reports put the peak U.S. television audience at nearly 23 million viewers. It is the highest rating and largest audience for any U.S. World Cup match in U.S. television history. The overnight rating approached the ratings of the recently concluded NBA Finals. The game had such excitement that even FOX's commentators and announcing team could not put a damper on the event.

The crowds in Vancouver were in high spirits, the twitterverse was all abuzz, and the Tweeter-in-Chief Barack Obama tweeted: "What a win for Team USA! Great game [@CarliLloyd!](#) Your country is so proud of all of you. Come visit the White House with the World Cup soon." Lloyd assured the president that he would see them soon.

This Women's World Cup received more attention than any previously, going back to the first in 1991. It had the greatest number of participating teams in the history of the event, a good sign for the future of women's soccer across the world.

Even though some of the newer teams were over-matched and took a beating, the opportunity for them to be seen on the world stage by their countrymen should give them a higher profile at home which then could translate to support from their local federations. The opportunity for them to compete against the best players in the world is quite important and should inspire them to greater levels of achievement. The parallel with the Dream Team at the 1992 Barcelona Olympics and what that did for the state of basketball across the world offers the hope that this could be a turning point for Women's Soccer globally.

As to this victory and the future of women's soccer in the United States one would hope there will be a lasting impact. However in the past what appeared to be a great opportunity for growth, fizzled. Attempts to build on the earlier wins with the inauguration of a professional league could not be sustained. It is clear however that these earlier World Cups did inject some enthusiasm for the game at the youth level.

Whatever is the case this time around it is quite clear that women's soccer has undergone tremendous growth in its popularity and visibility in the United States. The contrast with the first competition in China in 1991 is worth revisiting.

I remember quite vividly the first time I met Michelle Akers. It was a few months after she led the United States Women's Soccer team to their first World Championship in 1991. Akers came to my Sport History class to talk about this victory and her position as the greatest female soccer player in the World.

Michelle had been overpowering in that tournament scoring ten goals, including the only two in the championship game against Norway which the U.S. won 2-1. A crowd of 65,000 fans in Tianhe Stadium in Guangahou, China, cheered wildly as Akers scored the winner with just minutes remaining in regulation time.

As soon as Michelle Akers began to speak I knew the students and I were in for an extraordinary evening. First she described the experiences of the team in China, showed some video highlights of the tournament including her winning goal against Norway, and then talked about Women's Soccer in the United States and her own future in the game.

She praised the Chinese fans for their enthusiasm and support. She had never played in front of a crowd this large, and never before had fans tried to rip off her jersey at the end of the game. "Overwhelming," was how she described it. She talked about the thrill of playing for her country and of course the great joy of the victory.

Then Akers turned her attention to the U.S. Soccer officials. When the U.S. women returned home there was no one at the airport to welcome them. Many U.S. Soccer officials were in fact angry that the women had won. They wanted the men's team to take the U.S. soccer spotlight and they wanted no one to intrude. So when the women won the World Championship soccer officials refused to honor the victory. Instead the women were treated as if they were a plague on U.S. Soccer.

Akers went on to discuss the various ways in which the Women's team had been slighted by U.S. Soccer officials. The list is a familiar one: Inferior practice facilities,

inferior travel arrangements, almost no support to help them survive financially while they practiced and competed for their country. No attempt was made to find sponsors and Akers suspected that sponsors were actively discouraged from supporting the Women's team. U.S. Soccer's publicity was all directed toward the Men's team. It was typical of the wholesale discrimination against women's sport that still prevailed in the United States in 1991. The mind-boggling thing was that here was a group of world champions being treated like interlopers by the male dominated soccer bureaucracy precisely because they were world champions.

What all this meant to Michelle Akers was that she must work harder and longer, show greater determination and make certain that Women's Soccer continued to grow. She turned her anger into determination. She told the students that she wanted to win another World Cup, win a gold medal at the Atlanta Olympics, and force U.S. Soccer officials to recognize the women on an equal footing with the men.

So here we are 24 years later. The scene in 1991 will not be repeated and this year's champions will get much of what is their due, at least in terms of fame and public praise. There is still a long way to go in terms of equality for women in this sport and the dolts at FIFA need to be moved in that direction. In terms of financing, playing conditions, medical protocols, and payouts much remains to be done.

Let us hope this will turn out to be the point at which the first step of what someday will be regard as a historic journey begins.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't need to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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