

World Cup

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE

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Do you believe in miracles?

Since it was first used by Al Michaels on the ABC telecast during the final seconds of the U.S.-Soviet Hockey game at the 1980 Olympics, this line has been quoted countless times by American sports fans. Watching the totally unexpected play or the remarkable outcome to some game, fans have often turned to this phrase to express their wonder.

Anyone who watched, or participated in, the recently concluded World Cup would have had any number of occasions to shout the phrase. It is hard to imagine that more than a handful of fans could come away from this remarkable event still able to doubt the efficacy of miracles.

The only issue here is to try to decide where to begin in enumerating the amazing, shocking, and totally unexpected occurrences. There were enough to keep heads spinning for weeks and months to come.

The focus naturally is on the two teams that reached the finals. Both of them depended on miracles, or something akin to miracles, to reach that destination.

Coming into the World Cup there were few who could be found, outside or inside the inner circle of the Japanese team, who would have predicted a World Championship. The very fact there was a team at all seemed a miracle in itself following the massive disaster in March. But there was a team, and it was a team that sought from the beginning to bring some relief, and perhaps even happiness, to their country.

To reach the finals the Japanese team needed to win their group and then go through both Germany and Sweden to reach the finals. The Japanese women had never beaten either side. First they defeated the third ranked two-time defending champions Germany, playing before their home crowd, 1-0. Next it was Sweden, who had beaten the U.S. 3-1 in group play. Japan replicated that score in defeating Sweden and I am certain I was not alone in being surprised by these results.

As for the Americans their route to the finals was full of potholes and missteps beginning with qualifying for the tournament by the slimmest of margins. Then in group play as

noted, the Americans lost to Sweden, leaving them to face Brazil in the quarterfinals. Most Americans had anticipated a group win, and that would have set the stage for the Brazil/USA final that was not to be. In the match against Brazil the U.S. was outplayed through much of the game, and in what was clearly a miracle, they avoided defeat when Abby Wambach put away a header 122 minutes into the 120 minute game. The miracle goal tied things at 2-2. It was in fact the first goal of the match scored by the U.S., as the first American tally came from a Brazilian "own goal" just two minutes into the game. Wambach's goal was the latest ever scored in World Cup competition. Adding to the miraculous quality of the victory, the U.S. had only ten players on the pitch following a red card awarded to Rachel Buehler at the 69 minute mark of the game.

The penalty kicks followed. Oozing with confidence following the miracle of resurrection, the U.S. women made all their penalty kicks in the shootout propelling them into the semi-finals.

Here, once again, the Americans were outplayed for a good portion of the match as France displayed some great passing and fine technique, announcing their arrival as a new force in women's soccer. In the end the U.S. prevailed, but not without some shaky moments.

This set the stage for the final on Sunday as it would be the USA against Japan in what on paper was clearly a mismatch. The U.S. had a record of 22 wins, three ties, and no losses against Japan. The Japanese had never won a World Cup, while the U.S. had won two.

Both teams arrived at the final game looking like teams of destiny. The only question was, who was destined for victory and who was destined for defeat? The match-up held great promise as a display of sport at the highest level, but no one could have anticipated just how great this match would turn out to be.

In the first half the Americans dominated play, but failed to score. In the 69th minute Alex Morgan scored on a breakaway. Then the USA went into a prevent defense, which as is often the case in the NFL, failed to prevent. In just ten minutes Myra Miriyama answered for Japan as the USA defenders seemed to be playing table tennis in front of the net. So it was on to overtime. In the 104th minute Abby Wambach, with one of the familiar headers, put the U.S. up 2-1. Surely that settled it.

A cautionary note was sounded by ESPN's play-by-play man, Ian Darke, who told commentator Julie Foudy that he thought there

was still plenty of drama yet to come. The comment was prescient, and even a bit chilling.

Thirteen minutes later drama struck like lightning in the form of Homare Sawa who, off a corner kick, put the equalizer in the net over the outstretched arms of the American goal keeper, Hope Solo.

Shortly thereafter destiny played itself out in the shootout when the American confidence, so evident against Brazil in this phase of the match, now deserted them. The Japanese goalie, Ayumi Kaihori, was all over the net and stopped two shots while the Americans missed the net with two other shots. Kaihori had played a magnificent game in regulation and added to her "player of the match glory" in the shootout.

The other qualities put on display by the Japanese throughout the World Cup, in addition to their well-honed skills, were persistence, determination, and a tremendous will in the face of adversity. These were the qualities that were said to be possessed by the American team especially after their miracle match against Brazil.

Americans believe that if you keep on trying and never give up you will prevail. This is a quality that seems imbedded in the culture, and comes, in part, out of the Calvinist belief in predestination.

Americans know they are a people of destiny, but on this day they met a group of Japanese women who faced adversity before they left home, faced it repeatedly on the field of play, and in the end were the team destined to victory displaying those qualities that Americans thought belonged to them.

They did, but not exclusively.

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

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