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Olympic Games: Bombs, U.S. Women's Soccer, Ethiopian Runners

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
July 29, 1996

The Olympic games took one of those nasty, although not totally unexpected twists, Friday night. In Centennial Park a bomb went off and reminded everyone how vulnerable we all are in the modern city. For those killed and wounded it was of course much more than a symbolic event, and for those of us watching this staged pageant from the comfort of our homes it was a reality check.

Of course no one expected the games to be cancelled over this. If the events in Munich could not stop the games, nothing short of nuclear war could stop them, and even that would be doubtful if it didn't effect the venues. This should be another reminder about the nature of the modern world. Corporate investment and individual sporting ambition far outstrip a few deaths and a few hundred injuries.

We will have our moments of silence, and the flags of the Olympics will fly at half-staff, but the games must go on. The IOC says so, the USOC says so, the President says so, the AGOC says so, NBC says so, and let's face it, we all say so. Across the world people are at equal or greater risk each and every day, and life goes on because it must. Our games go on, although not for the same reason.

I went to my first Olympic games last week. Not in Atlanta, but here in Orlando to see several first round games in the men's and women's soccer competition.

This Olympics is nothing like what is on NBC. There are actually games, without commercials, without up close and personals, without any drama added by videotape manipulation. There are sometimes events involving no Americans. Yes, trust me on this. I saw Spain play France, and Nigeria play Japan, and there wasn't an American even among the referees, and it was still interesting. Please note that not only are they playing soccer in these real Olympics but there is an American women's team, and a very good one at that. And now that they are headed to the gold medal game NBC has been forced to acknowledge their existence.

The best of the soccer, that I saw, was in the women's game between the U.S. and Sweden. The speed, coordination, and finesse of this game was far superior to that of the men in

France v. Spain, or even Nigeria v. Japan, although the Nigerians play a sparkling passing game of tremendous speed.

For me one of the main attractions was the chance to see Michelle Akers play again. The oldest of the American players Michelle Akers is a University of Central Florida product who in her prime was acclaimed as the best female soccer player in the world. While at the University of Central Florida she kept UCF Soccer near the top of the national polls, and in her junior year she was named woman's college athlete of the year, and won the first Hermann Trophy, soccer's Heisman.

When women's soccer held its first world championship in China, Michelle Akers led the U.S. to the championship, dominating both her opponents and the game itself. Shortly after that achievement she spoke in one of my classes about soccer, women in sport, and the world championship.

One of things she discussed that night was her desire to see women's soccer as an Olympic Sport, and her determination if that happened in '96, to be on the team. The intensity with which she talked was impressive, and the dedication she has displayed to her sport is equally so. Her dream was to play before the home crowd at the Olympics for the gold medal. She will have that opportunity on Thursday evening.

Over the past few years Michelle Akers has endured injury after injury to her knees and legs, and has been through an excruciating four-year battle with the Epstein-Barr virus which produces chronic fatigue. She has worked through all this, and despite enormous odds and fading skills she still is a key figure on this team. No longer the best women's player in the world, and now even playing a new position, her skills still make Michelle Akers a formidable threat on the field, and you can still see the flashes of greatness.

After years of struggling with injury, with disrespect for the women's game, and with the movement of the calendar, Michelle Akers has not only played in the Olympics in the United States, but she has done it in her adopted home town. As she circled the field in a victory lap wrapped in an American flag the other night in Orlando, it was a pleasure to be there and see what those watching the NBC Olympics would not see.

Finally a quick note on the Women's Marathon. Fatuma Roba's victory is a great one for both her and Ethiopia, and if all goes well Ethiopian victories will follow in the Women's 10,000,

the Men's 5,000 and 10,000, as Haile Gebreselassie and Derartu Tulu lead the Ethiopian team. The barefoot Abeba Bekila's legacy is alive and well.

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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