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Greg Ryan and the goalkeepers

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
Greg Ryan and the goalkeepers
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It is sometimes called second-guessing. In this case, it was first-guessing. From the moment that U.S. Women's Soccer coach Greg Ryan announced that he would replace Hope Solo in goal with Briana Scurry for the semi-final match in the Women's World Cup, there was a outpouring of astonishment mixed with criticism directed at his decision. It defied belief then, and it defied belief even more after the fact as the U.S. Women suffered their worst defeat in World Cup play.

Hope Solo led this U.S. team through World Cup medal play and the quarterfinals without a loss. Over the previous forty games when Hope Solo was in goal the U.S. had not lost. She had not been scored on for 300 minutes in World Cup play. As for Scurry, she had plenty of World Cup experience, but she had played in only four matches over this past year.

Ryan's explanation: "Bri is a great matchup because of her quickness and agility against a team that creates chances in the box off the dribble, off quick combinations," Ryan said. "Bri's reaction time, and it has been tested recently, is by far the fastest I have ever heard of."

Ryan called it an easy decision and one that anyone who had seen practices would understand completely. Maybe so, but anyone who saw that game with Brazil would not come to the same conclusion. Scurry displayed neither quickness nor agility, particularly on the second goal that put the U.S. in a deep hole. Scurry looked rusty, and the U.S. defense looked sluggish in the face of the dazzling Brazilian passing and shot selection.

This is not to say that the outcome would have been any different with Solo in goal. This was an excellent Brazilian team that outplayed the Americans throughout the game. The first goal was an own goal that no goalie would have stopped. The third goal was off a two-on-one break and then the fourth came as a result of a remarkable set of moves by Marta. The last two goals were scored with the U.S. short one player, the result of a very bad call by the referee.

The pertinent question is whether the entire defensive pattern would have been different with Solo in goal. Was there a breakdown of communication between the defense and this goalie

who had not played much in recent months? Did the chemistry of the team suffer a disruption by the change in goal? The answers to these questions may well be "yes," but even if they are "no," it seems strange that a coach would risk such an outcome at a time when the U.S. team seemed to be playing like a very well oiled machine.

Should Greg Ryan be held responsible for the loss? Coaches are always responsible for losses. That is the nature of the profession. Should there be consequences for the coach? In a sense there already have been. Could the entire matter have been handled better? Certainly. Ryan apparently told Scurry quite some time in advance that she would play against Brazil. Nothing was said to Solo or the team until less than 48 hours before the match.

If Solo knew this was the plan well in advance would she have handled it better? One would hope so. If the team knew this in advance would any potential fallout have been headed off? One would think so. Has severe damage been done? Maybe. Can it be repaired? Perhaps. Could all this have been avoided? Most certainly. Would it have changed the outcome of the game? Probably not.

It is not likely that the U.S. Women will play in world competition with Briana Scurry in goal again. It is likely that the immediate future in goal lies with Hope Solo. One would hope that her public reaction to these events has not permanently divided the team or destroyed confidence in her as a teammate. Coach Ryan, if he is the coach next year, had also better hope that he has not permanently damaged the confidence of Hope Solo, his relationship with Solo, and his relationship with the team.

It is unfortunate that so much focus has come on this decision because lost in the noise is the fact that the Brazilian women's team was dazzling in its play. Marta is clearly one of the great stars of the game. Her goal against the U.S., in which she passed to herself, circled the defender who was on her, then took the ball and faked another defender, and then finished by putting the ball in the goal, was a sight to behold. It is a piece of work that will be in any highlight reel of Women's World Cup soccer for several decades to come.

Also not to be lost are the achievements of the German team which came to China as the defending World Cup champion. Not only did they play precision soccer at a very high level, but, as they successfully defended their World Cup title, they did so

without allowing a goal through the entire month long tournament, outscoring their opponents 21-0. In the championship game against Brazil, the Germans displayed precision play coupled with some superb goal tending and tight defense, all combining to produce a 2-0 win and a second consecutive World Cup for Germany.

For those who watched any of the games over the past month, several things are clear: the quality of play across the world has improved tremendously; there is still a gap in levels of play with many teams not yet ready to compete at the world class level; and women's soccer is an excellent sport worthy of the full attention of the world soccer community and the world sporting community.

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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