Michelle Akers and American Women's Soccer

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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. 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 tape highlights of the tournament including the 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 as 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 far she has not been able to achieve the first goal as she was injured in the opening game of 1995 World Cup in which the U.S. was ultimately defeated by Norway. She did achieve the second goal with a gold medal at the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta, again with the U.S. women outshining the men. In fact U.S. women's soccer continues to be played at the top of world competition, while the men flounder on the world scene, offering a dismal and whiny performance at last summer's World Cup in France.

With the arrival of 1999 and the third women's World Cup it would appear that two of Michelle's goals are within reach. The Disney Corporation with their television sports domination at ABC and ESPN will televise all the World Cup games to a 75 nation worldwide audience. Ticket sales have now passed the 400,000 mark and attendance should surpass a half-million.

Corporate sponsors have followed from the success. Coca-Cola and McDonald's have become chief corporate sponsors of the event for a fee of six million dollars each. The budget for the tournament is in the $30M dollar range, which compares to $40 million spent on the men's tournament in 1994. The U.S. women are now being paid a salary of $40,000 and most of them have endorsement contracts. Mattel will produce a "Soccer Barbie" and the tennis shoe giants are signed on.

Mia Hamm, Akers' successor as team leader and greatest woman player in the world, has become a major presence in the electronic and print media and is piling up the endorsement contracts. No less a figure than Phil Knight of Nike compares her to Michael Jordan. In a fortuitous convergence Mia Hamm was born the same year that Title IX legislation passed the U.S. Congress and women's sport arrived at the takeoff point.
On the field itself the U.S. remains a favorite to win the World Cup, but it is no longer a prohibitive favorite. The chief rival once again will be Norway, but the women from China, Australia, Denmark, and Holland will be highly competitive as well.

In her fourteenth year on team U.S.A. and having battled courageously and successfully against Chronic Fatigue and Immune Disfunction Syndrome Michelle Akers will not be the dominating presence she was in 1991. She will not stand out over and above her fellow players as she once did. She will however remain a leader and inspiration to all her teammates, many of who now see her as the grand old lady of women's soccer.

Those of us who have seen her work ethic and tremendous talent over the years will not be surprised if she emerges over the next soccer fortnight as a key figure in the 1999 World Cup. The sheer power of her will is awesome to behold and could return her, if only briefly, to the Michelle Akers of eight years ago. It would only be fitting.

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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