The 1999 US Women’s World Cup Team: Short Term Popularity or Lasting Impression?

Honors Thesis

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ABSTRACT

The Women's World Cup in 1999 is one of the most surprisingly successful events in American sports history. With charm and athleticism the US women's team transformed a nation otherwise largely indifferent to the game of soccer into fans overnight. This paper examines the careful planning and marketing that went into the Cup, how the Cup was used as a springboard for a women's professional soccer league in the United States and the lasting and short term effects of the hype surrounding the Cup.
The United States women’s national soccer team had a history of success, unrecognized by the public, going into the 1999 World Cup. It was tired of being ignored and had dreamed of developing a professional league of its own in the US. The team and organizers of the Cup decided that the timing was perfect – soccer was the largest growing sport among females in 1999 - to try to bring women’s soccer to the forefront of sports. They prepared to make the Cup a huge ordeal, but no one could have predicted the level of success the event would have. Organizers were proposing to house women’s soccer matches in some of the largest stadiums in the United States – a plan destined for failure based on the history of attention received by the Women’s National Team. The team knew at the outset of the Cup that its performance in the event would be crucial to their long ignored sport. In their minds, anything less than a World championship could be considered a failure. Playing in half-empty stadiums and losing games would only set women’s soccer back. The team would instead promote the tournament themselves, pack venues game after game, display all the skill and passion of male athletes, win games, charm fans and become an overnight success. The US women were being asked not just to win the Cup but also to sell soccer to the American public. The players in turn discovered that they, young muscular women of surpassing skill, had become new kinds of American heroes (Starr and Bryant 49). The team’s brightest star, Mia Hamm, knew there were expectations going into the Cup. “We came to understand that this World Cup wasn’t just about us making it to Pasadena and winning. This is a historic event far beyond any single result. If we lost sight of that, everything we did would be for nothing” (Langdon 7C).
The first Women’s World Cup was held in 1991. A young American team dismantled the competition in Guangzou, China. On November 30, 1991, 65,000 fans at the stadium in China watched the US women win the inaugural tournament. The little known event received minimal coverage in America. The world champs returned home to a welcome wagon of one person at JFK International Airport (Plaschke D3).

The US team would go on to finish a disappointing third in the 1995 Cup held in Sweden. The 1996 Atlanta Olympics brought an opportunity for a quietly successful team to make a name for itself in its own country; it would be the sport’s Olympic debut. But NBC showed only snippets of games – ten minutes total for the entire Olympic tournament. They were preoccupied with showing more popular sports, like gymnastics and basketball. The team drew over 76,000 spectators to the University of Georgia to watch their gold medal win, 2-1 over China. There was no jubilant national reaction. There was nowhere really for fans of women’s soccer to go. The next big event would be in the summer of 1999. A devoted group of fans spent three years waiting for the Cup. By July 10, 1999, they were frothing at the mouth – and most of America had joined them (Wahl, “America’s” 64).

By 1999, the country was not only ready to embrace the sport, but the team was ready to sell it. It was anxious to convince the United State Soccer Federation that a women’s professional league was necessary and feasible. At the time, soccer was the fastest growing sport in America among women in both high school and college. From 1981 through 1999 the number of women’s collegiate soccer teams grew from 77 to 818. By 1999 there were 93 more women’s teams than men’s at the university level. On the high school level 257,586 girls registered to play soccer in the 1998-99 school year,
compared to 11,534 in 1976-77. Of the 18 million registered soccer players in the United States, 40% of them were female, according to the Soccer Industry Council of America. There was a definite audience for the 1999 World Cup, it was just a matter of reaching it (Longman, “Soccer’s move” D1).

Cup organizers took the first step in reaching those fans by securing a television contract with ABC. The network agreed to televise all 32 Women’s World Cup games on ABC, ESPN and ESPN2. For so many soccer games to be televised in such a short time period was unheard of. The fact that they would be women’s games was even more outlandish. ABC was taking a huge risk. The network was willing to go out on a limb in part because there were no other appealing options for sports programming at the time. The Cup was slotted in the test pattern week between the end of pro basketball and the beginning of professional football. The National Hockey League playoffs were history and in the middle of the professional baseball season, it was too early for any notable drama. For the three weeks of the World Cup, the United States would be transformed into a women’s soccer country (Wahl, “Kicking” 58).

With that in mind, organizers of the Cup went in to the planning stages thinking big: big crowds, big stadiums, big advertising, big impact. The Rose Bowl, RFK Stadium and Giants Stadium were quickly snatched up as venues. Built as huge football stadiums, each in a different city, sites were purposely spread out in order to attract bigger crowds. According to the tournament’s chief organizer, Marla Messing, scheduling decisions were not based on favoritism but were entirely driven by marketing concerns. Critics of the tournament layout thought that the US team’s first round schedule resembled more of a victory tour than a round of qualifying matches. They were paraded across the states,
while teams from other countries were stuck at only one venue throughout the tournament.

Critics of the planning, like New York Times writer Bill Plaschke, viewed the “tour” as a pre-mature celebration. Plaschke wrote that “organizers took out their indelible ink pens and plotted the inexorable march from sea to shining sea.” He saw “definite chauvinistic and realistic expectations that the Yanks would win” (Plaschke D3). Other writers agreed that maybe things were a little too convenient for the Americans. George Vecsey, also of the New York Times saw no reason why the US women shouldn’t have won, considering the circumstances. “Just about everything had been engineered for the Americans in their home country. They had the easiest travel schedule.” In preparation for the final, the US had “a fairly logical meander toward the West Coast, while the Chinese had to put twanging hamstrings in airplanes for coast to coast treks” (Vecsey, “Will” D1).

Organizers had television backing and huge stadiums to fill; now the Cup just needed fans. The nineteen companies that sponsored the ‘99 World Cup were taking a chance, hoping to reach young girls who had gotten caught up in the soccer craze, and especially their parents. Companies like Bud Light, Gatorade and Nike spent 6 million dollars a piece on sponsorships (Starr and Bryant 49). The team’s lone household name, Mia Hamm, would be relied upon heavily in pre-Cup ad campaigns. The American team became a marketer’s dream with skilled, college-educated, funny, accessible and attractive players. Organizers used multiple approaches to reach several different demographic profiles, but at the grass roots level, they aimed at an audience that was largely white, suburban and middle class. This was one reason sponsors were willing to
support the event: the target audience of Cup promoters was identical to that of the big
name sponsors. In addition, these giant companies were getting bargain prices in
comparison to what other large scale sporting events would have charged. The Cup
would also go for a three week span, where an event like the Superbowl is only one ad
for one night (Longman, Girls 15).

One of the most memorable advertisements was for Gatorade. Hamm and Michael
Jordan go head to head in everything from fencing to basketball to track and field, all to
the tune of “Anything you can do, I can do better.” Hamm ends the commercial with a
convincing Judo slam of Jordan. Ads like this projected the arrival of the female
superstar. Hamm’s was a face that people would recognize, doing something that most
people could not do. It was a hit.

Print ads ran in Sports Illustrated, with long-time team member Kristine Lilly
lacing up her Adidas cleats as a young girl and tying up those same shoes again around
twenty years later. “There from the beginning” was scrawled across the bottom of the
page. The idea was to bring fathers to the stadiums to bond with their daughters.

Marketers also pushed teamwork. The whole team was seen attending a date with
squad member Julie Foudy in a Bud Light commercial. When Julie ordered, the rest of
the team echoed her. When she excused herself to go to the restroom, so did the other 19.
They were to be viewed as a unit. In some print ads leading up to the Cup, up to five
teammates would be featured; many of them were not even recognizable to non-soccer
fans. It didn’t matter to promoters. They were just trying to project an all-for-one attitude
and a wholesome, girl-next-door image. For the vast majority of the players, that image
was very accurate. They did not fit the typical money hungry, crime prone athlete
stereotype. Every player on the team was either a full-time college student or had a four
year college degree. Two players were already moms.

In addition to advertisements, team members also threw themselves into self-
promotion. They sought out fans. There was no place too small for the women’s team to
visit. Malls, soccer camps, schools sporting goods stores – the team was there, tirelessly
signing autographs for kids who probably didn’t even know who they were.

The marketing push going into the Cup did not revolve only around the childish
innocence of the team. A good deal of attention was also given to its sex appeal.
(Longman, Girls 34). Research has found that female athletes tend to be
underrepresented and deathleticized in magazines. Studies have also shown that when
females are depicted in the media, they tend to be presented in sexist ways which
trivializes the small amount of coverage they do receive (Dietz-Uhler 220). ‘Sexist’ refers
journalistic tendencies toward discussing a female athlete’s home life or hobbies, rather
than focusing on athletic ability. Journalists have also been criticized for commenting on
the physical appearances of female athletes in articles (Dietz-Uhler 219). In Sports
Illustrated’s first commentary on the Cup, columnist Rick Reilly referred to the team as
the “Goal Goal Girls.” Feminists and other critics believed that the popularity of the team
was due in large part to the sex factor. A debate ensued among players, coaches, officials,
expert observers, feminists and the media about the roles that gender sex and beauty
played in the popularity of the team and about the manner in which it was portrayed to
the public (Longman, Girls 34-36).

Many of the players were willing participants in the sexualization of the team – by
themselves and by news media (Longman, “Soccer’s” D1). Defender Brandi Chastain
posed for Gear men’s magazine, wearing only her cleats and a strategically placed soccer ball. Chastain said she did so to show her body as an instrument of her talent: to send a message that female athletes can be strong, confident and unashamed of their physiques. Team Captain Julie Foudy referred to teammates as “booters with hooters.” Late Show television personality David Letterman declared himself the unofficial mayor of “Babe City,” the nickname he gave the team of “hot mamas.” The team also posed for a picture for Letterman in which they were seemingly wearing nothing but oversize t-shirts, cleats and big smiles. Letterman regularly displayed the picture throughout the Cup (Brennan, “US team’s” 3C).

While some players encouraged the attention – Chastain was quoted as saying that it didn’t matter what brought fans to the stadium, as long as they came – others thought the team was getting noticed for the wrong reasons. Team veteran Michelle Akers did not feel comfortable with the actions of some of her teammates. “Everybody has to make their own decisions on how they want to be portrayed. Regardless of that, it has a reflection on us as a team and women’s sports as a whole. You don’t want something like that to detract from the excellence of this team and the message that we’re striving to put out” (Longman, “Soccer’s move” D1). The Cup’s chief organizer, Marla Messing, defended the tactics in question. “We went after male fans. So what? So much has been written about sex appeal, but there are beautiful women everywhere. If they were not great athletes, nobody would care” (Vecsey, “Will” D1). USA Today’s Christine Brennan backed the team’s appeal in her column. “Good looking people, be they Mia Hamm or Michael Jordan, interest us more than ugly people. That’s not sexism, that’s reality and that’s not new” (Brennan, “US team” 3C).
Once the tournament got underway, the popularity of the team grew. This time it was due to their skill on the field and personality off it. Viewers and media were impressed by the backyard quality to their enthusiasm that elicited a national embrace. Talk shows were buzzing with talk of the charm of the emerging team. Even Oprah recognized that “these girls can play.” Mechelle Voepel of the Kansas City Star wrote of the appeal of the team shortly after its first match: “People are still longing for the days when athletes were like them. The days when baseball players used to ride the subway and had jobs in the off season like everybody else. When they saw the soccer team, they saw people they knew” (Longman, Girls 24). The women were “everyman’s” team. Defenders Carla Overbeck and Joy Fawcett were moms juggling sport and their children. Defender Lorrie Fair was taking summer school during the Cup (“Ratings” 7). Michelle Akers, a team superstar since its creation in 1985, was 33 years old and reported never making more than $200,000 in one year. Humble and successful, these players were the antithesis of the coarsening of American sport. They did not whine over injuries; they did not openly quarrel with teammates; they didn’t leave school early to go pro and they didn’t have shoe contracts (Longman, “Soccer’s” D1). USA Today’s Brennan saw a unique quality in the women’s team that was hard to find in other professional athletes. “You know the tug-of-war that goes on with some male athletes and that dreaded role model mantle? These women love the pressure of rising to expectations. They want kids to emulate them. To call them a role model is to compliment them” (Brennan, “US soccer” 3C).

Boys as well as young girls wanted to “Be like Mia.” Cartoons appeared in newspapers with little boys playing soccer against one another with one saying, “I’ll be
Mia, you be Briana Scurry.” An article by Erik Brady in USA Today showed how boys were going girl crazy, often wearing Hamm’s #9 jersey to games and painting her name across their chests. Team member Shannon MacMillan welcomed the attention. “We grew up looking up to male athletes. Now little girls look up to us, and if little guys see us and say ‘I want to play like you’…wow, that’s just awesome.” Brady asked a group of boy fans whether or not they liked the team for their talent or looks. “Both,” they replied. “Prettiness has nothing to do with soccer, but they are a really pretty team” (Brady, “More” 14C).

Adult males liked the team too and even made statements on their behalf. Trey Anastasio of the alternative band Phish wore a Mia Hamm jersey onstage during a concert in Atlanta on July 3. The US women hadn’t just won over mainstream America, but a counter culture as well (Bamberger 50).

That the team was decidedly attractive continued to increase their popularity, along with the debate as to the reason for the attention. Writer Christine Brennan wanted to know, if this was the chosen team simply because it was so appealing to the sports media, the vast majority of which are men (Brennan, “US soccer” 3C). Michael Bamberger of Sports Illustrated pointed out that while the team did have sex appeal, their looks were not their best asset. He compared the women’s team to other athletic icons:

You’ll see players whose sex appeal, like Michael Jordan’s flows more from their charm, their spirit, their power, their grace, their strut, their performance. That was the case with this team. These players appear to be disarmingly comfortable with their femininity, sexuality and duality as butt-kicking babes. To be fair, so was the ice maiden Chris
Evert in the 70’s and the 80’s, but there were no high speed collisions in her sport (Bamberger 47).

Sports Illustrated’s Rick Reilly, however, continued to play up the “girly” side of the team. “The revolution is here and it has bright red toenails. And it shops. And it carries diaper bags. The US women’s soccer team is towing the country around by the heart in this Women’s World Cup, and just look at the players. They’ve got ponytails! They’ve got kids! They’ve got curves! (Reilly, 100).

As the team progressed through the tournament into the final match, anticipation built. The team was covered on front pages with a prominence formerly reserved for men’s teams in major sports, meaning not soccer. The US women played Brazil in the quarterfinals before 73,123 fans at Stanford Stadium. Men’s Major League Soccer teams DC United and the San Jose Clash played immediately following as part of a double header to a crowd of about 13,000. Everyone else had left (Brady, “Will” IA).

The team of laid back tomboys finally started to feel some pressure going into the final match against China. Team Captain Julie Foudy “felt like barfing out of nervousness” during warm-ups (Longman, Girls 14). The US women’s softball, basketball, volleyball and soccer teams had all won gold medals in the 1996 Olympics. They were dubbed the women’s games, and the Women’s National Basketball Association was born a year later with memories of Atlanta still fresh in fans’ minds. Americans felt that there was no substitute for the world stage. A World Cup championship was crucial to their goal of developing a women’s professional soccer league in the United States. To add to the pressure, US soccer officials scheduled a
meeting for July 9, two days before the final would take place, to discuss the possibility of a league (Brady, “Will” 1A).

In the final match, the US did not disappoint. The game was played in dramatic fashion. A scoreless tie, two overtime periods, goal-line saves, 100-degree heat and near misses kept a record number of fans on the edge of their seats at the Rose Bowl. Forty million more viewers watched from home as the country’s newest sports heroes beat China 5-4 in penalty kicks.

The victory over China posted a 13.3 overnight rating on ABC, the highest ever for soccer and better than both the National Hockey League and National Basketball Association playoffs. The previous record was a 12.8 for the men’s 1994 Cup final in Pasadena, a game the US team did not qualify for. The 90,185 fans at the Rose Bowl would also set the record for attendance at a women’s sporting event. The 650,000 tickets purchased for the three week event more than doubled the 300,527 sold at the 1999 NCAA Women’s Basketball Tournament, formerly the largest sporting event for women in this country (Plaschke, D3).

Praise for the winning team came from all directions. USA Today’s Christine Brennan, one of the team’s biggest fans, saw something in the US team she did not see in other athletes. “This group of 20 superb athletes have been adopted by millions of fans starved for true, honorable, and humble sports heroism – combined, of course, with an uncanny ability to do whatever it takes to win” (Brennan, “US Team’s” 3C). Sports Illustrated’s Michael Bamberger agreed. “These players have an unspoiled love of the game and team rarely seen anymore in American sports. They’re actually having fun. That’s because these players have toiled in relative obscurity for years, as amateurs and
professionals (Bamberger, 47). In a USA Today Letter to the Editor, new soccer fan Richard Unger told readers what he liked about the team. “It wasn’t about ego, it wasn’t about every player for herself, it wasn’t even about going to Disney World. The women of the American soccer team were all about respect, morals, faith, honesty, friendship, teamwork, and above all about what makes America great” (Unger, 16A). President Clinton called the game “the most exciting sports event” he had ever seen.” He also predicted that the event would mobilize young girl’s to play soccer, and other sports too (Calvin, 7).

In the weeks following the Cup, soccer experienced the ‘Mary Lou Retton’ effect. Right after the American gymnast landed her perfect vault and a gold medal at the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles, little girls swamped gyms across the country to emulate her. There would be no shortage of Mia Hamm wannabes taking up soccer following the Cup (Langdon, 7C). US Youth Soccer saw a dramatic increase in the number of phone calls and hits on its website, most of them from prospective players wanting information on how to become involved (White, 16C).

The W-league, a league of 34 women’s semi-pro teams that competed during May through August, also received a surge of phone calls from cities who wanted information on franchises. Even more contacted the United Soccer Leagues about starting a women’s professional league in the United States (White, 16C). Keith Cooper of FIFA, soccer’s world governing body, was skeptical of the attention. “We’ve clearly caught lightening in a bottle, but it’s one thing to point toward a single event like the World Cup and another thing to start a league” (Mravic and O’Brien, 22).
A few months after the Cup, North Carolina and Notre Dame drew a record crowd of 14,410 for the NCAA Women’s Soccer Championship. That same season, the Santa Clara women’s soccer team had the highest attendance average among fall sports. They outdrew the men’s team by more than 2-1 (Longman, Girls 23).

The win and whirlwind victory tour, which included talk show appearances and golf exhibitions, gave the women and their fans high hopes for the creation of a professional league. There were many factors in their favor.

Just as US sports fans like national teams that win, they won’t settle for less than the best pro league in the world. A women’s league in the US would be the global standard bearer for the sport. The presence of the American players and the money involved would be a strong draw for all of the world’s best talent (Mravic and O’Brien, 22).

A women’s league would be in a market all its own. It would not be competing with MLS games because females playing soccer appeal to a different demographic group than males playing soccer. It was a different product. A women’s league would cater to more women, young girls and suburban households, while the MLS attracted a largely male and international fan base (Wahl, “Out of” 38). Soccer power-player and billionaire Philip Anschutz already owned three of the MLS’s 12 teams and was particularly interested in the development of and partnership with a women’s league. He was especially interested in using the women’s popularity to help the struggling men’s league but nevertheless, he was willing to help. He suggested that double headers with MLS might increase attendance for the first division men’s league incrementally, and presumably ticket prices and revenue would rise too (Langdon, 7C).
Advocates of the partnership pointed out that the women’s style of play was more appealing than the men’s and that they could potentially outdraw the MLS. Fans like to see goals. As opposed to men’s teams, which typically try to get up by one goal and then pack 11 guys into their own box for 85 minutes, the women’s game took an offensive approach and tried to score often.

Some felt that America was finally ready to embrace a league because the women’s team was good. The players had talent. The country was ready to see some winners after a few embarrassing performances by men’s teams on an international level. In the 1999 Ryder Cup, the US was shamed. US hockey was also humiliated early on in the year. In the men’s 1998 World Cup, we finished dead last (Reilly, 100).

As another built in advantage for soccer, the Olympics and the Women’s World Cup gave it an international stage on which to shine every two summers (Brady, “Will” 1A). The US team would have another chance to drum up national support in 2000 when it defended its Olympic title in Sydney. One point that critics and advocates alike agreed on: a league wouldn’t start until 2001 since the world’s top teams would all be playing in the 2000 Olympics (Wahl, “Out” 38). Television executives agreed. ABC Sports President Howard Katz said that his company was “interested, but a lot of it depends on if the women win the Olympics next year” (Sandomir, “Sale” E7).

Not everyone was so sure that a women’s league could survive though. Buried somewhere in the commotion of Women’s World Cup mania was a quiet reality, according to critics: corporate America was far less smitten with women’s soccer than soccer fans were. If businesses failed to rally behind a league significantly, then it had no future. The US team may have been the toast of America, but its marketing potential may
have been tapped out. Men’s national team player Alexi Lalas knew about temporary 
hype from experience. “One thing we learned in the 1994 World Cup is that the circus 
comes to town and then it leaves.” Lalas saw his dream of a league come true, but also 
saw ratings and attendance steadily decline once the initial excitement left fans (Wells 
and Horovitz, 1B).

The lack of a willing superstar spokeswoman was also a major problem for the 
league. Without the equivalent of a Michael Jordan to serve as the icon, marketability 
decreased greatly. Mia Hamm, the 1999 team’s most well known player, was shy and 
reserved. She often avoided the spotlight or redirected credit to teammates. She was 
almost too much a team player to be a good spokeswoman for the league. The members 
of the team as a whole were too group oriented, critics said, to be able to be dispersed 
among different league teams and still be superstars on their own. They weren’t stars by 
nature; they were team players (Longman, Girls 97).

Marketing firms involved in discussions for league development became 
skeptical. IEG Sponsorship President Lesa Ukman actually played collegiate soccer but 
sadly admitted that “while we all want women’s soccer to take off, the truth is, it just 
doesn’t generate the interest of men’s soccer” (Wells and Horovitz, 1B). Research has 
traditionally shown that even for women’s sports, the male fan base heavily outweighs 
the female. The same was the case with women’s soccer, as a reported 25% of fans were 
female. Why would men watch women play when they could be watching men? (Dietz-
Uhler 221). But Mediacom chief negotiating officer Jon Mandel did not think that gender 
had anything to do with the difficulties. “The problem is, ratings are low. It’s not because 
it’s women playing the game, it’s because it’s soccer.” Mandel makes an important point.
While the ratings were huge for soccer, especially women’s soccer, they rivaled only those of a good college football game (Wells and Horovitz, 1B).

FIFA voiced concerns about the number of top flight players available for such a venture. The final game between the US and China featured the best teams with the best players in the world. Would fans come out week after week with no world title on the line? What would ratings look like once those players were distributed among different franchises, and backed up by mediocre teammates? (Heistand 3C). FIFA’s Cooper again expressed his concerns with starting a league. “There’s a huge difference between the short focus of the World Cup, where all the stars are concentrated, and week in and week out games at a lower level. There are only 30 outstanding, hardcore female players in the world” (Wahl, “Out” 38).

Even Cup winning coach Tony DiCicco expressed apprehension about how long the Americans would remain at the top of women’s soccer. Seven of the 1999 team’s starters played roles on the 1991 title winning team. They were all in their late twenties or early thirties. The time left on their careers was limited (Langdon 7C).

Even with the team’s fortunate television coverage during the Cup, ABC had agreed to air only one more game, in October, for the remainder of 1999. The team’s next televised appearance would not be until 2000 and was not guaranteed to be on television. Fans were being forced to wait nearly a year until the 2000 Sydney Olympics, by then, some might have lost interest (Heistand 3C).

Because of the indecision over the league’s potential, nothing further than discussions took place before the end of the year. The women’s team had other troubles
to worry about. Their sudden superstar status contributed to superstar contract negotiations.

Despite the overwhelming success of the team, the salary disparities between the men’s and women’s national teams were all too obvious. Headlines screamed that the women would receive $12,500 each in bonuses for winning. The US men got $20,000 just to play in the 1994 Cup, $388,000 if they had won. To the women, that just didn’t seem fair (Shipley D8).

The women’s team and the United States Soccer Federation were expected to begin negotiations immediately following the Cup, but an outside venture by the team caused a problem. Wanting to promote their dreams for a league and not wanting to lose momentum, the team signed a contract with IEG marketing group to participate in an indoor victory tour over the fall months. US team members were guaranteed $41,250 each, or $3,750 for each of the 11 indoor games. Some players could make more money on the victory tour than in an entire year playing under the USSF contract (Shipley D8).

The USSF wasn’t informed of the tour until after the contract was signed and had already scheduled matches in Australia for some of the same dates. The Federation refused to offer the women a new contract. Further, they threatened to not renew the old one and to fire Coach Tony DiCicco for not disciplining his players.

The Federation argued that it actually lost money on the women’s team in 1999. It reported spending 4.4 million dollars on promotions, facilities and salaries; 2.7 million of that was lost. The Federation lost money on the men’s team too though, spending around 5.9 million and losing about $700,000. Of the women’s demand for higher compensation, one USSF official retorted, “You don’t see the WNBA [Women’s National Basketball
Association] players asking for the same salaries as the NBA [National Basketball Association] players.” Analogically though, the women’s team was comparable to the NBA, while the men’s team was nearer to the WNBA. The women were the more popular and higher achieving. They had two world championships and a gold medal under their belts already, compared to an empty trophy case for the men’s team. The biggest crowds for men’s games had always come in areas where the ethnic population was often cheering for the other team (Longman, Girls 59).

Finally, in December of 1999 a contract was presented to the players and their lawyers. USSF officials felt that they had held out long enough and knew it was not realistic to not renew the contract of a world championship team. All 20 members of the 1999 squad signed the agreement by February of 2000. The women agreed to be paid $5,000 a month to train and compete for the national team. They would also be paid $2,000 for appearances meaning playing in matches, appearing at various locations, public speaking and autograph sessions. Soccer moms Joy Fawcett and Carla Overbeck would also be given funds to cover the cost of child care and food for their kids while on the road (Longman, Girls 180).

Similar to the contract squabble was a smaller quarrel within the team for media attention. Some players believed they had been snubbed. In the medal ceremony Briana Scurry, the team’s only black player, was cut out of several shots “deliberately,” according to her mother. Scurry did not fit the wholesome all-American image that they were trying to project. Scurry’s mother told papers, “I know prejudice when I see it. Black girls and athletes are denied certain things whether they want to admit it or not” (Longman, Girls 285).
Tiffeny Milbrett, one of the team’s starting forwards, also had a gripe with the sex factor associated with the team. “People’s opinions are that this team is gorgeous. That doesn’t bother me. What bothers me is the double standard in society and athletics. I am not drop dead gorgeous. I don’t know what I can do, score more goals I guess. I did get some publicity, but I don’t think I got my share. I do think that I am somewhat of a victim of that double standard” (Longman, Girls 234).

Scurry furthered the chaos surrounding the women’s team when she was quoted in the Los Angeles Times saying, “It’s only cheating if you get caught.” Scurry was referring to accusations that she had broken the rules in the penalty kick shootout by moving off her line before the ball was kicked. Goalkeepers frequently move off the line prematurely as a form of gamesmanship. If the referee deems the movement too great, the kick can be re-taken. In this case, Scurry blocked the Chinese shot, essentially winning the game for the US. USSF officials were upset with her candid comment, and doubting journalists jumped on the opportunity to dismiss the team as a positive influence promoting women’s sport (Longman, Girls 297).

One notable publication saw the women’s team as an outstanding influence. In December 1999, Sports Illustrated gave its annual “Sportsman of the Year” distinction to the entire US Women’s World Cup team. Only one other team was ever honored with the award, the 1980 US hockey team that upset the Soviets in the Olympics. Sports Illustrated wrote:

The Women’s World Cup was competition at its most vibrant and the final took your breath away. It fused two often ignored elements of American sports, women and soccer, into one transformative moment
and held the nation in thrall. It was the most significant day in the history of women’s sports bearing the fruit of passage of Title IX in 1972 and surpassing by a long shot that burn your bra night in 73’ when Billy Jean King beat Bobby Riggs…the final summer of the 20th century, the era of the woman in sports finally arrived” (Bamberger 52).

The victory in 1999, helped boost soccer in the US as well as around the world and put the United States team well on its way to developing a women’s professional league. The women dealt themselves a crucial blow in the summer of 2000, however, failing to win the Sydney Olympics. They were defeated in the final by Norway. By then, many minor sponsors had already committed to help fund the league, but the hype from the 1999 Cup had died down considerably, and other sponsors were no longer offering money to the project. It was clear that ABC television was no longer interested. Instead, PAX became the official television network of the league. League advocates decided to press on nevertheless, but the league would have to settle for the support it could get. Over the next year eight Women’s United Soccer Association (WUSA) franchises were scattered across the nation with the members of the 1999 team evenly distributed to different teams. The recognized founders of the league were the 20 members of the ‘99 Cup team that essentially made the league possible (WUSA).

The league kicked off on April 14, 2001, in RFK Stadium. Mia Hamm’s Washington Freedom faced Brandi Chastain’s Bay Area CyberRays team. The inaugural game brought in 34,148 fans, but that would be the largest crowd ever to attend a WUSA game (WUSA). As soon as it began, the league started going downhill.
The $40 million dollar budget expected to last for five years only survived one, putting the league in desperate need of major sponsors. Many sponsors were happy to get the league off the ground but were disappointed with the amount of advertising generated by it. With minimal commercial breaks in the sport, they complained that the advertisements lining stadium walls were simply not enough to keep them satisfied.

Also, many soccer fans were true fanatics. The same faces would attend game after game, but new consumers were rarely reached. Merchandising was another flop. The WUSA succeeded in selling licensed goods at the stadiums where games were played, but sporting goods and apparel stores reported low sales, more proof that the only people that cared about the game were already there (Sandomir, “Sale” E7).

The WUSA saw a steady decline in attendance and poor TV ratings from the outset. Average attendance fell from 8,116 in 2001 to 6,667 in 2003. The league never had a game on network television, and ratings on the little known PAX Network were poor. Around 100,000 people were tuning in for games. Oxygen Network for women also occasionally broadcast games, but that did not help the league’s popularity. The 2003 season produced a $20 million dollar shortfall, and over three years, the league accumulated $90 million dollars in debt. The players knew the league was in trouble.

At the start of the 2003 season, players took a 30% pay cut. Average salaries fell from $46,361 to $37,235 a year (Whiteside, “WUSA” 3C).

Still in serious trouble through the middle of the third season, WUSA officials came up with an emergency financial plan that would keep the league afloat if eight sponsors with $2 million each would come forward. No one was buying. League officials had no choice. Founder John Hendricks announced on September 15, 2003,
that league operations were suspended indefinitely (Michaelis 1C). Just as the 1999 World Cup signified an awakening in women's sports, the failure of the WUSA raised questions about whether or not a women's league could ever survive.

USA Today's Christine Brennan put the failure of the league into perspective. "When fans packed stadiums in 1999 to watch the team, they were really lining up to watch personalities in the big event. The struggling economy has a lot to do with it. It says something about American sports when the league with the most positive role models is cancelled" (Brennan, "Dreams" 10C). Still, the cancellation of the league was hardly noted. The news did not surface on the front page as reports of the 1999 team's victory had. A Letter to the Editor in USA Today expressed the indifference most of America had towards the league's demise: "Title IX the federal law that bans discrimination at schools with federal funds has given women a false impression that the general public actually cares about women's sports. Newsflash...we don't" (Houston 10A).

The announcement that the league would be no more was made four days before the World Cup of 2003, also held in the United States. The Cup was originally set for China, but the SARS scare moved it to the US. The familiar situation of the Cup being held in their back yard gave American players and coaches renewed optimism that the league could be saved sooner rather than later. New team coach April Heinrichs saw the Cup as an opportunity. "Our hope is within the next 30 days these women will again inspire a nation and have someone step up and invest in our cause" (Whiteside, "WUSA" 3C).
A few games into the World Cup it was announced by league founder Hendricks that it was likely that the league would be revived. To a smaller degree than in 1999, sponsors were again smitten by the team and their cause. It would take $30-35 million to get the league running again in its 2001 form. Hendricks announced that financial institutions, apparel merchandisers, shoe manufacturers and furniture stores had already expressed interest in helping to save the league, but that the 2004 season would have a different look as the league took time to rebuild (Whiteside, “New” 1C). The 2004 format will feature eight teams playing at four venues. The season will be shortened to a 8-12 game season. Since 2004 is an Olympic year, the league will only run from April to August so that the best players will be available for league play before leaving for the Games (Whiteside, “WUSA” 7C).

Though the WUSA is yet to be successful, to look at the league’s failure as a representation of women’s soccer in the United States would be a mistake. The Women’s World Cup of 1999 will be viewed for years to come as one of the country’s most surprising sports stories. The team did a remarkable job of spreading throughout the culture more quickly than any other team in US sports history, save the 1980 men’s Olympic hockey team (Brennan, “US team’s” 3C). The Americans quickly transcended their sport, then approached a kind of mythical status. The Women’s World Cup team stripped athletics down to its barest passion. We cheered like we thought we could never cheer for ponytailed and earringed wonders. The New York Times’ Bill Plaschke may have summarized the team’s performance best. “It was a triumph of character from a group of women who spent a summer carrying the hopes and dreams of all women’s athletics on their thin shoulders, delightfully skipping under the weight” (Plaschke D3).


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