

A WHOLE NEW WORLD CUP CRAZY: EVENT'S IMPACT WAS IN ITS APPEAL TO ALL KINDS OF FANS.

Author(s):

JODY MEACHAM, Mercury News Staff Writer

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LOS ANGELES – Evelyn Williams, a 78-year-old San Jose grandmother who has never been a sports fan, watched her first televised soccer match Saturday when the U.S. national team won the Women's World Cup.

"I sat there transfixed from 10 to 3," she said Sunday. "I couldn't move out of sight of the TV. I was overwhelmed by the concept of the whole thing, what these women stood for, the whole concept of seeing what came out of what they thought would be a small, small thing. Such unselfishness. Such teamwork."

When she watched black U.S. goalkeeper Briana Scurry make the game-winning save, she saw in her mind's eye her white granddaughter, who plays goalie for a club team in Seattle, and their "sweet, round faces" looked the same.

"I can understand the joy and the dedication and exuberance of their being in this sport," Williams said. "If it weren't for this old broken back, I think I'd go out there and kick the ball around myself."

Williams isn't part of the demographic group that sports marketers or advertisers covet in trying to sell their products through sports. But in the afterglow of what proved to be the best-attended event in women's sports history – more than 650,000 tickets were sold, and the 90,185 fans at the Rose Bowl on Saturday were the most ever at a women's sporting event – she represents what may be the World Cup's most indelible legacy:

People who never before paid attention to games felt sports' powerful ability to inspire and lift the human spirit. They got why sports are a big deal.

Two days before China and the United States took the field in Pasadena, U.S. teammates Julie Foudy and Brandi Chastain went to a matinee at a theater near the stadium. Two teenage girls were waiting in the lobby, and one was crying.

Foudy asked if the girl was injured, "and she said 'No, I'm not hurt.' And then she didn't say anything. In the movie theater I asked Brandi if she thought the girl was all right,

and Brandi said she was crying because she knew we were on the soccer team. That's happened a lot, where kids just start bawling. It made me shake my head, the impact you have on kids. That's what's so great about this tournament."

The spectators and media coverage of the tournament were overwhelmingly American. But coverage in China, Brazil, Africa and Europe planted seeds of ideas and attitudes that will sprout in unknown ways.

Women who play soccer in 15 other lands came to the United States with greater dreams for the tournament than just playing in the World Cup. They hoped things would be transformed for them back home by having the tournament in a country so hospitable to women's sports and so effective in spreading its popular culture around the globe.

"That's what we hope that the Americans will give to us with this World Cup," Norwegian captain Linda Medalen said.

Yet an event powerful enough to create such hopes also has the power to dash them. Ghana Coach E.K. Afranie, whose team went home after failing to get a victory in its first World Cup appearance, worried that the failure could end funding for his team and the sport.

"This will be a big blow to us," he said. "We must go home and try to convince the government not to give all the money to the men because of this embarrassment."

In the United States, the World Cup raised expectations of a breakthrough in professional sports for women, but it provided no definitive answers.

"It's given people the courage to put on big events," Foudy said. "Always in the past with women's sporting events, they didn't want to do it in large venues, they didn't want to do it on a first-class scale, because there was always the risk factor of no one coming."

The U.S. Soccer Federation took advantage of the publicity opportunity to reiterate that it was studying the feasibility of a women's pro soccer league, something it helped squelch in the aftermath of the 1996 Atlanta Olympics, when women's soccer drew its first large crowds. Such a league would begin after the 2000 Games in Sydney.

"If we don't have a professional league, it's going to be hard to keep playing in (tournament) finals," U.S. Coach Tony DiCicco said.

But as big as World Cup attendance figures were, other leagues have struggled or failed despite even greater promise.

Major League Soccer, founded in 1996 after the 1994 World Cup for men in the United States drew nearly 4 million fans, is still in the red after three seasons even though it has a national television contract and major sponsors.

"It's a lot easier to put on a big event – to bring the World Cup here, to bring Olympic soccer here – than it is to sustain it week in and week out, year in and year out," said Marla Messing, president and CEO of the Women's World Cup.

Gary Cavalli was one of the founders of the American Basketball League, which began play in the aftermath of huge attendance for women's basketball in the Atlanta Olympics only to fail last winter after 2½ seasons. Cavalli said the U.S. women's soccer team "was a greater success than the '96 Olympic basketball team.

"But there's a big difference between drawing crowds for a one-time event and a league," Cavalli said. "For a World Cup, you've got the whole country focused on one team. For a league, you have to sustain support and excitement for a longer period of time. Those big stars on the national team, instead of being on one team, would be spread throughout the league."

Just as losing could set back women's soccer in Ghana, people in the soccer business fear that failure of a league could be a huge blow to women's sports in the United States and elsewhere.

"There's not much point in doing it and it diving," said Keith Cooper, spokesman for FIFA, soccer's international governing body.

Some of the appeal of the World Cup wouldn't be present in a pro league either.

"So many people have embraced this team because we're not getting rich off this," U.S. forward Shannon MacMillan said. "We're just 20 girls who are following their dreams together. We're not worried about money and whatnot."

Even so, the appeal of the World Cup was underestimated in the United States, even by some of the most important players in the unfolding drama.

While organizers sold a full slate of 11 corporate sponsorships at \$4 million apiece, several buyers, such as McDonald's and Coca-Cola, went no further with their promotional efforts than their signboards around the field.

By the time the first round of the tournament was complete, Messing said several sponsors were scrambling to leverage their investments with other ideas after seeing large crowds at stadiums.

Allstate, the insurance company, used the World Cup as its first national sports-marketing venture, complete with promotions at its agencies and sponsorship for a \$1 million goal-kicking contest at halftime of the USA-Nigeria match in Chicago (the contestant didn't win, but Allstate had bought insurance against the prize).

"We took a calculated risk, but right now we're looking like pretty smart people," spokesman Raleigh Floyd said. "We really felt like for our first time out (in sports marketing), if this didn't go over the fence, it got folks at least to the warning track.

"It will make people think the next time with a women's event – all things being equal – that they don't want to miss the bandwagon twice."

The press was slow to catch on as well, particularly in cities that weren't involved in the tournament. Some sportswriters at the Rose Bowl paid their own way to attend when their papers declined to send them to Saturday's final.

What those slow to get on the bandwagon missed was an event of obvious impact, even if that impact isn't yet fully understood.

"I think the vibrations at our house aren't going to fade for a long, long time," Grandmother Williams said.

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