LEFT OUT OF THE HOOPLA AS SOCCER TAKES OFF IN U.S., IT GRAPPLES WITH REACHING MINORITIES GULF LARGELY ECONOMIC

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There is a revolution going on.

You can hear it in the high pitch of the stadium roar. You can see it in the red-white-and-blue-painted fingernails.

The Women's World Cup, closing in on 600,000 attendance, is succeeding beyond its organizers' expectations in spreading soccer, the world's game, to women.

But the leaders of the movement – Mia, Julie, Brandi and the rest of the U.S. national team – are a most unlikely group of revolutionaries in a sport that has been one of history's great social equalizers, integrating the have-nots with the haves, the excluded with the privileged, the third world with the first.

They are the fruit of the 30-year blossoming of U.S. soccer that, despite its gender equality, has all the racial diversity of NASCAR and the economic stratification of golf.

"In this country, it takes a lot of money to play," said Julie Foudy, the U.S. midfielder whose Stanford degree and Mission Viejo upbringing make her an archetype of the soccer community in this country. "I think it's a big problem."

Or, as the team's self-described "fly in the milk" – black goalkeeper Briana Scurry – put it: "Soccer is pretty much a suburban elitist sport. It always has been."

Not in the rest of the world.

Not in Brazil, where the poorest of the poor play the game in the streets and, when they sign multimillion-dollar contracts to turn pro, use single names such as Pele and Ronaldo.

Not in France, where the national anthem sung before the match calls citizens to arms against those with "impure blood" but where the team that won World Cup '98 had players with ancestry from Algeria, Armenia and Guadeloupe.

According to annual figures compiled by the Soccer Industry Council of America (SICA), 18.2 million boys and girls played soccer in the United States last year. Athletes' families making $25,000 to $50,000 annually represented the largest segment of the U.S. soccer population, and the next-highest income group was $75,000-plus.

'**A long way to go**'

SICA Executive Director Sandy Briggs said the study's racial and ethnic breakdowns are unreliable because minority participants have been less likely to mail back the survey forms. Also, differences in the way racial and ethnic groups are defined in the survey and by the U.S. Census Bureau make a comparison with national population breakdowns impossible. But he said the sport "has a long way to go in recruiting and providing services to the black community."

"Soccer needs to do a much better job reaching blacks and Hispanics," said Alan Rothenberg, past president U.S. Soccer, the sport's national governing body.

From U.S. Soccer's point of view, it is missing out on a huge talent pool that can keep U.S. women's teams the best in the world and bring the men's teams up to par. It has committed a quarter of the $8 million it will spend over the next five years in soccer development to underprivileged neighborhoods.

"We want to tap into that resource," U.S. Coach Tony DiCicco said.

But there is also the view that soccer can play the same role in U.S. society that it does elsewhere, and it can do it in a way traditional American sports, with their limited international appeal, do not.

"Soccer is pretty cool," said Jill Robbins, national program director for Soccer in the Streets, which tries to promote the game in the inner city. "It is a worldwide brotherhood, an international passion. To expose these kids to something that is so universal is really special. Wow! They play soccer in Africa? Everybody plays it! These kids become part of the world again when they've been so disenfranchised."

Scurry and Saskia Webber, the only other U.S. national team player with African-American ancestry, are as exceptional for what they represent in the larger U.S. society as for their presence on the national team.

When she was young, Scurry's family moved from downtown Minneapolis to suburban Dayton, Ohio, where she was "pretty much the only African-American for quite a few miles."

Webber grew up in the Ivy League enclave of Princeton, N.J., the daughter of a black father and a Dutch mother.

"Half my family is very rich in the soccer tradition," she said. "I have a very big field in my back yard, and that's where I learned to play."

Theirs aren't the backgrounds most Americans think of in connection with minority kids in baseball, basketball or football. They came from families that could afford $125 uniforms, plane tickets to regional and national tournaments and $1,000 a year or more to play in the Olympic Development Program.

"One summer alone, we went through $8,000," said Frank Slaton, a San Jose teacher with two soccer-playing daughters.

Danielle Slaton, whose father is black and mother is white, started playing as a 5-year-old in the Mount Hamilton League. But as she developed, her parents began the long commutes across town so she could practice and play for the Central Valley Mercury, a select team that has won three national titles. As with swimmers or tennis players, soccer players in the United States may play on school teams, but those with potential must seek higher competition elsewhere.

"Club soccer is very expensive, and club soccer is where the development of kids takes place, not in the high schools," said Jerry Smith, women's soccer coach at nationally ranked Santa Clara University, where Danielle Slaton will be a sophomore midfielder this fall.

Differing views

Scurry and Webber don't believe they would be where they are if not for their upper-middle-class upbringing. But they also don't believe racial discrimination is a factor in the whiteness of American soccer.

"Frankly, I can't recall ever having problems because I was black," Scurry said.

Others, however, say race or ethnicity is a barrier to participation in the sport.

"I've heard from a lot of teams that, when they go to tournaments, they're matched against tougher teams to get them out of the competition," said Al Pacheco, a native of El Salvador and the coach of an under-12 boys team in the North Valley Youth Soccer league in San Jose and Milpitas. "They say they get a hard time when checking out their papers because Hispanics cheat on their birth certificates."

Robbins, the Soccer in the Streets director, recalled a conversation she had with the kids on an all-black team she helped form in Youngstown, Ohio. It sounds eerily similar to the one Brooklyn Dodgers President Branch Rickey had with Jackie Robinson before Robinson broke baseball's color line in 1947:

"I told them they had to be above reproach," she said. "They could never do anything the least bit dirty. They would be subject to racial comments and such. They would always have to keep their cool. They always had to be better."

Nurtured in suburbs

Many say soccer's roots in U.S. suburbia are mostly attributable to the sport's late birth in this country, when traditional American sports, which share the sandlot heritage of international soccer, were already entrenched. Soccer also came along at a time when parenting was in a fearful shift away from allowing kids free run of their neighborhoods to more structure and adult control.

A kid who wants to play soccer in the rest of the world needs only a ball. In the United States, a kid needs to join a formal team – and pay its fee – and be driven to practices and weekly games. The whole operation is overseen by a volunteer bureaucracy of coaches, referees and snack-shack workers.

"That's what suburbs are all about," Briggs said. "We wouldn't have a soccer industry in this country without those folks."

"It's a shame you hear the 'soccer mom' demographic, but it's true," said Foudy, who grew up near Torrance, birthplace of the American Youth Soccer Organization. Founded in 1964, the group claims more more than 630,000 players and 250,000 adult volunteers.

Those building blocks of organized soccer wall out players whose families don't have enough money, transportation or time to volunteer.

The suburbanization of soccer "has reached an alarming stage," said Jose Navarete, coach of the Juventus Exiles, an under-15 girls team in Redwood City. "As a minority, it really gets frustrating to see what's going on around you. And overall, it's not in the best interest of the game or the girls."

Although many leagues offer scholarships to poor players, Navarete said the purpose behind the grants often is to attract talented minority children, not to ensure that large numbers of minorities have the opportunity to play.

"The goal of a lot of these teams is to put the best team together, and there are some girls that may be exploited," he said.

More minority athletes would be attracted to soccer, particularly the women's game, if there were more professional opportunities available and enough media coverage to publicize role models, Smith said.

"If we're not considered mainstream, those athletes are going to choose volleyball or basketball," he said. "You don't think Jennifer Azzi or Chamique Holdsclaw would be awesome soccer players? You bet they would be. But why soccer?"

Scurry said she sees herself as a role model for black kids and has asked Nike, the major backer of U.S. Soccer and the women's national team, to send her into big cities for clinics.

"But soccer takes a lot of space," she said. "You've got to have some grass. There's a bazillion and one places to play basketball, and there's so few places to play soccer. I don't see soccer approaching basketball in popularity among African-Americans in my lifetime."