



July 09, 2015

# US Women's & Men's Soccer: A World Cup of Difference

by Mike Richman

The U.S. women's soccer team is a powerhouse on the world stage.

The American women just won a record third FIFA World Cup, beating Japan Sunday in Vancouver, Canada, in demonstrative fashion, 5-2. That record is startling considering that international football is far from the most popular professional sport in the United States. Plus, the U.S. women have never finished out of the top three teams since the women's World Cup debuted in 1991, and have never missed out on the Olympic gold medal since winning silver in Sydney, Australia in 2000.

The U.S. men's team, in comparison, lags behind perennial football juggernauts such as Germany, Argentina, the Netherlands and Brazil.

The American men have never even made it to the semifinals in the modern era of World Cup competition, and only made it to the quarterfinals once, in 2002.

So why is there such a disparity in success between the two U.S. teams?

## Late Start

"I think you have to begin with the fact that almost every country in the world prioritizes their men's national soccer team," said Steven Goff, who covers international football for *The Washington Post*. "On the women's side, there are only about 10 or 20 countries that take it seriously.

"The second point is that the development of men's international soccer goes back 100 years," Goff added, "and the U.S. men's development system for soccer really didn't get started in earnest until the 1970s and 1980s, so we're decades and decades behind in men's soccer development. That's not something you can make up overnight or even within 10, 20 years."

George Quraishi, founder and editor of the U.S.-based soccer publication *Howler Magazine*, also said the U.S. men had a "late start" relative to the rest of the world. He points out that the American men went 40 years without competing in a World Cup, a stretch that ended in 1990. They have qualified for every World Cup since then.

"That's a long period of time to go without just participating in the World Cup," Quraishi said. "But now young players see they're the guys they're supposed to look up to playing in the World Cup, knowing that that's a possibility, having expectations, having the coaches who have that experience, who sort of retired from playing soccer and can go and help the next generation of players achieve the same.

"It would be pretty shocking now for the U.S. men not to qualify for the World Cup for a couple of reasons, but for a long time that wasn't the case," Quraishi said. "The expectation wasn't there."

## Women's Sports

In terms of the women's game, Goff and Quraishi agree that the United States has made a commitment toward the success of women's sports, including soccer, that goes far beyond what many other countries have done.

A centerpiece of that commitment is Title IX, the U.S. federal law passed more than 40 years ago that prohibits discrimination on the basis of gender in any federally funded education program. Title IX forced universities to invest in women's sports, and soccer benefited tremendously from funding created under the law, according to Quraishi.

"And I think what we see with the women is the U.S. was one of the first countries to really establish a strong tradition of women playing soccer and to put the programs in place," Quraishi said. "I think college soccer had a lot to do with it. We

had a feeder system from the very beginning. [College] teams like North Carolina, UCLA have been providing talented players to the national team for decades now."

Thanks to its women's team, the United States is on top of the international soccer stage.

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