

Women's Soccer in Crisis – A Voice from the Pitch

In this post Caitlin Fisher talks about the treatment of women's soccer in the United States as compared to men's soccer and makes an argument that perhaps we should stop holding it in comparison with men's soccer and see it as a different interpretation of an old sport.

The year 2012 has started out on a bleak note for women's football. First, it was the **folding of Santos FC women's team**—the most widely recognized women's professional club team in Latin America—and then it was **the suspension of the United States' Women's Professional Soccer (WPS) league**. While both were terminated for their specific reasons, the common denominator was a lack of funding, rooted in a lack of fans, rooted in...what?

The Santos FC women's team folded in large part because the Santos Club's men's team wanted to keep the young new star Neymar in Brazil. In order to fend off offers from some of the biggest European clubs, Santos had to increase Neymar's salary and cut costs—the club viewed its women's team as a cost. The juxtaposition here is tremendous, where one male player's salary resulted in the folding of the entire women's team within the same club, and less than one month of his salary could cover the entire R\$1.5 million (close to US\$ 900,000 or £500,000) cost of the women's team for the year. However, it is crucial that the blame does not fall on this young talented athlete who actually tried to rally sponsors together to revive the women's team.



Photo: **Adrienne Grunwald**

Then, last month, the WPS said it has 'suspended operations' for the 2012 season. The reason being an insufficient number of teams and a dispute with one of the team managers that led to a pricey lawsuit. The news made barely a blip in the media.

I arrived in the U.S. last week from my current residence in London not at all surprised but certainly saddened that nobody knew of the U.S. women's league's collapse—not even my own soccer-loving parents.

Not only do all of these professional female players—many of whom I have played with at various stages throughout my career—suddenly have nowhere to play and must scramble to find a source of income, but all of the girls engaged in what has become the nation's most popular girls' sport have just had their role models pulled away from them and made invisible. Yes, we **still** have

the national team, but it only really gains visibility during and immediately following the large international sporting events; our stars emerge and then vanish abruptly, leaving us yearning for more regular contact.

As a young player, when the images of strong, talented, skillful, determined, confident and empowered female soccer players emerged in the public eye and then launched the women's pro league WUSA, they deeply shaped the way I felt about myself and my ambitions—I identified with them and I saw possibility. I can still, to this day, name every single player on the US's 1999 FIFA Women's World Cup team —Julie Foudy, Kristine Lilly, Carla Overbeck, Mia...I could go on—I can recall their numbers, tell you where they played in college, what type of role they performed on the team and more. *Seeing* those players changed me and then they were made real by their presence in the league. **You cannot be what you cannot see.**

However, much like what we are witnessing today is a repeat of history; the WUSA folded in 2003 after a short three seasons. It was the same story with WUSA, WPS, and Santos. In each case, the problem was that people were not watching women's football. The women's game has not been able to generate enough popular support nor build an extensive fan base to feed its sustainability anywhere. But why is that?

Why are people not watching women's football, when women's tennis, for example, is wildly popular? Part of it certainly has to do with its lack of visibility in the media. It is another example of the chicken-and-egg dilemma, because if there were more media coverage and better marketing, then undoubtedly more people would be interested in the game. But there is also the matter of interpretation.

Cross-culturally the women's game is commonly positioned as a weaker, slower, less exciting version of the men's game. One of my guy friends in college used to call women's soccer "underwater soccer" because our long balls were shorter, our timing slower, our shots softer, our jumps lower, and our sprints less explosive. But slower, shorter, softer than what?—than the men's game, of course. Well, so long as the women's game continues to be positioned as a worse and less exciting version of the men's game, then certainly people are going to always opt to watch the men.

For the women's game to truly become successful, for Santos FC to come back and for the WPS to return for good, I believe that we need a paradigm shift in which we start to look at women's football as a different interpretation of the sport. Women are not just playing a slower version of the men's game, rather they are imbuing the game with different meaning through different embodied movements and style, making the game unique in itself and not a lesser version of the male.

In fact, throughout my ethnographic research on women's football in Brazil, many people have suggested that the women's game today is actually closer to the men's game of the 1960s when great stars like Pelé played—a style characterized by accuracy, grace, precision, and team harmony. Perhaps the women's game can then draw our attention back to the splendor of such qualities and style.

However, if we continue to try to market the women's game in the wake of the men's game, it will always fall short. In order to shift the paradigm, we need to open up the cultural space and collective imagination for interpreting women's football. When men started playing football in the late 19th century in Britain, the public did not know how to watch the game so it had to be introduced with a focus on describing the movements, the physicality, and the body. We have yet to introduce the women's game to the public. But I am certain that when we do, it will thrive.



Caitlin Fisher is a Cambridge, Massachusetts native who captained Harvard women's soccer team and played professionally in Brazil, Sweden and the United States. She completed her MSc at the Gender Institute, LSE in 2010 and co-founded the **Guerreiras Project** which has recently been nominated for **Women Deliver 50**. She is now in Brazil on a Fulbright Fellowship documenting the lives of the **Guerreiras: The Female Warriors of Brazilian Futebol** with photographer Adrienne Grunwald.

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