

The Good, The Bad & The UGLY of the Women's World Cup

Okay, so I had the right teams paired up just in the wrong match. The United States Women's National Team took on Norway on Sunday in the FIFA Women's World Cup but instead of it being for the title it was for third place.

And I had the winner right as the USA defeated the Norwegians and played well in capturing third place. Good stuff.

As was the final between the defending champion Germany and the upstart and soon to be champion Brazil. Indeed, the two finalists were well deserving of their place in the final and Germany was more than deserving of its second straight WWC title.

Overall, the 2007 WWC was outstanding but like any other major tournament, it had its share of the good, the bad and, alas, the ugly.

First the "ugly".

UGLY #1

That would be the style of play employed by the USA women prior to its third-place match. Coach Greg Ryan, a former hard-nosed defender in the NASL, decided that his style of play would be: "Bomb the ball downfield and let Abby Wambach run under it and head it to goal. The heck with the midfield. Possession? Nah, not us. Let's just knock the ball into the attacking third toward Abby."

This was boring soccer. Absolutely horrendous soccer. Despite having players capable of holding the ball, players capable of dribbling through traffic, players capable of quick, effective 1-touch soccer, Ryan had the girls playing direct soccer. But hey, they survived the first round and got through England (another up-and-coming team, by the way) in the quarters.

Then came Sunday. In went Ali Wagner as an attacking/central midfielder. All of a sudden the USA was controlling the ball, knocking it around in the middle third like they use to. And in went the goals against a very, very good Norway team.

Note to US Soccer Federation: if Ryan is remain the coach as we head into some friendlies and prepare for the Olympics, please have him guarantee that he will employ this possession game and let the players showcase their talents. If he can't guarantee that, then kicks his butt to the curb and hire Lauren Gregg, whom you should have hired when Tony DiCicco stepped down as coach. In fact, kick Ryan's butt to the curb anyway and hire Gregg.

UGLY #2

The Hope Solo fiasco was an ugly incident but it did something that as needed -- it generated badly needed publicity to the WWC as all major media outlets were picking up the story.

Let's address the incident: Ryan decided prior to the semi-final match vs. Brazil that Brianna Scurry would be a better fit between the pipes than Hope Solo, USA's number-one keeper. This was a bad decision by Ryan as Scurry had not had much playing time leading up to the World Cup while Solo had established herself as one of the best GKs in the world. Ryan's reasoning was Scurry was more athletic. The move didn't sit well with Solo, obviously, and was also met with some skepticism by the players.

The loss to exciting Brazilians didn't help the situation but when Solo went public with her feelings -- calling out Ryan and criticizing Scurry -- this ugly event became uglier. Commenting to the

press, airing out your feelings, is a sports no-no, especially when you point fingers at another player, a teammate.

Ryan reacted correctly by talking with the team and they all decided that Solo should not dress nor attend the third-place match. This was the correct move. While Solo certainly has every right to be mad, her remarks crossed the line. And now she is left on the outside and may have some trouble getting her place back in the squad. She has apologized and the players and Ryan seem to have accepted the apology.

Regardless, this incident took away some of the luster of the USA's third-place finish.

THE BAD (and we're not talking about Greg Ryan's coaching!)

Bad #1: shoddy goalkeeping.

I don't know if I've ever seen such awful goalkeeper at a high level as was displayed in this World Cup. Tony DiCicco, former USA National team coach, former goalkeeper himself, and now a commentator, was beside himself on occasion watching some of these national keepers. There were numerous technical mistakes -- which boggles one's mind -- and there were far too many tactical mistakes being made.

Some keepers were staying on their line when they should have moved off their line, while others were moving so far off their line they were being chipped, resulting in them backpedaling and flailing at the ball.

It should be noted that Hope Solo was not among this group.

Bad #2: Ryan's lineups

Where was Carli Lloyd? The midfielder was named MVP of the Algarve Cup and had become a goal-scoring threat with her lethal long shot.

THE GOOD (and we're not talking about the potential firing of Greg Ryan)

Good #1: Marta of Brazil.

Wow! No, WOW! Can this girl play some soccer or what. If you look up "Joga Bonita" in the soccer encyclopedia, there will be a picture of this outstanding Brazilian forward who put pretty much put every USA defender in her pocket. Her play in Brazil's thrashing of the USA in the semifinals was highlight-reel worthy and should be watched by every young girl in the world. Her play was the kind that Mia Hamm did that made her the idol of every young American girl.

Good #2: the Brazilian women's team.

Can you believe that these women have no place to play in that soccer-mad, machismo-dominated country. What the H-E-double hockey sticks is wrong with the Brazilian football association? These women deserve to be honored not only for their second-place finish but for their exciting style of play.

Good #3: Birgit Prinz of Germany.

Marta is indeed the best women's player in the world but Birgit Prinz is not far behind. In fact, she may be a more complete player than Marta, more in the mold of a Mia Hamm -- tremendous on the attack, quick on transition, relentless on defense.

Good #4: the champion Germans

The defending champs did not yield a goal in the tourney and while playing a very conservative style (what else would you expect from a German national team?), it was incredibly effective (again, what else would you expect?). They are now ranked number one in the world.

Good #5: the underrated stars of USA

Left Back Stephanie Lopez and midfielder Lori Chalupny established themselves as bona fide world-class stars.

Good #6: Kristine Lilly

Although the USA Captain played well below the level we are all use to seeing, just having her on the field is motivational for the USA players. Her relentless style and calm-under-pressure demeanor is a site to behold. But how much longer will she continue? Will she play in next year's Olympics? The thought here is that she should bow out at the Olympics. Perhaps as a Gold Medalist. What an absolutely great champion she has been.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The 2007 Women's World Cup was a great watch. Nearly every game had outstanding moments and thankfully, ESPN aired all the games. The announcers were good, especially JP Dellacamera and Tony DiCicco. Julie Foudy added good insight into the games and Heather Mitts did a good job in the ESPN studio with Rob Stone.

Because of this FIFA should re-open its idea of staging the Women's World Cup every two years instead of every four years. This would do wonders to help expand the women's game and increase its popularity among the millions of young females currently playing.

Players such as Marta, Prinze, Kelly Smith of England, Cristiane of Brazil, Wambach, Lilly, et al, proved that, pound-for-pound, they are every bit as good technically and tactically as the men.