

Where is the Game Going? An Analysis of Systems, Trends and Technique 04 Olympics From U.S. Soccer

The United States Women's National Team has been one of the Top 3 teams in the world for over a decade. There are many reasons for this, one of which is the attitude of aspiring to grow and progress as a nation. A vital element in this philosophy is evaluating all the top teams in the world, their strengths, and how the American player and team compare or set the highest standard in the world. The level of the women's game is radically and rapidly improving, and we as a country, despite winning gold, are hungry to do the same. The 2004 Olympics was an amazing event and a spectacular success for the U.S.A, Brazil and Germany, as well as developing nations such as Japan, Nigeria and Mexico. Below, we attempt to share our thoughts on what we can learn from other countries and players, where the game is going, and what areas of our own game the USA must train with urgency.

Focal Points in Technique Training in the USA

The Olympics gave us tremendous insight on technical areas in which we need to improve dramatically and with urgency as a nation. Here are the highlights as we move forward in an effort to urge coaches at every level (including the senior team) to spend a greater amount of time, energy and attention on the technical training of our players. After all, the technical implications to tactical success are found in every play that creates a breakdown. Before we can significantly improve tactically, we must first be competent technically.

Receiving:

Receiving is an area where the United States must spend some quality time improving. Years ago, many referred to this skill as "trapping," this title describing the ball being dead or not moving. It is essential that we train receiving the ball at speed and moving with our first touch. The Brazilians' first touch at speed is impeccable in every player in every position on the field. They can have a defender draped all over them or hitting them from behind, and they have the skill, balance, and suppleness in their feet to receive the ball well while being close to top speed. Marta is a perfect example of the technical dimension as a whole, and certainly, of possessing productive touches. China has always been known to possess an exquisite first touch, but it is different from the Brazilians. Chinese players (all of the players on their team, I might add) have an efficient and sharp first touch; Brazilians have that plus the added creativity of deception and flare (i.e. lifting the ball, flicking). Japan is starting to separate themselves in this skill as well, and their ability to play one touch is extraordinary.

We have a great need to train our players to receive the ball with the two demands of being under pressure and having to do it at speed. We should focus on our first touch both with our back to goal and facing the game. We also need our players to play different kinds of entry balls: perfect balls on the ground, but also balls that are driven, flighted, bouncing, skipping, hard, and soft. We need to put our players in environments to have these demands be game-like and for them to get repetitions at top speed. Limiting the space and having a time limit might help train this skill without defenders. It is vital to move toward having defenders to make it real and game-like.

In addition to first touch, we must also train our touches that follow the first. Do they

help us find space and time or do they get us into trouble? Brazilians are the best in the world in this area. Along with their ability to receive a ball under immense pressure at speed, their ensuing touches are creative and effective. They are dangerously penetrative when it's on, or they are possessive when it's not on to serve. They are comfortable with all surfaces of their feet not just in passing but also in dribbling.

Training the second, third, and fourth touches is an area that needs to be trained with a greater commitment in time and repetitions. Many coaches play one touch and two touch games, which are extremely important. Playing tight space games with mandatory 3 or 4 touches should also be considered. Coaches can train this area in 1v1 and small-sided settings. We must improve as a nation solving pressure with our first touch and our ensuing touches.

Striking the Ball:

Striking the ball with the instep for shooting and for long balls with both feet is a technical focus area that needs to be given high priority. Over the last decade, we, as a nation, have improved in the distance of our long balls, but overall, many American female players are not as comfortable striking balls with the instep as they are with the inside of the foot. This might be the reason that many players tend to use the inside of their foot when shooting from long range or striking a ball over distance when they should be using their instep.

Two common problems occur, with regards specifically to shooting with the instep - either the player does not actually use the instep (rather she uses the inside of the foot) and her shots rise because she strikes the ball underneath it or she has poor follow through. Shannon Boxx has textbook technique in shooting with her instep. Her shots rarely go over the crossbar, which is due to her follow through. Ideally, this skill is trained in a variety of situations, with the ball moving away from them (i.e. after a preparation touch, off the dribble), with the ball moving toward them, and striking balls out of the air/volleying.

With regards specifically to driving a ball with the instep, the common problem seems to be the place on the foot where the ball is hit. Many players do not actually strike it with their instep; they strike it with the inside of their foot so it bends. Driving balls with the instep must also be trained in different situations, with a ball played back to the player and with the ball moving away from the player (i.e. after a preparation touch, off the dribble). This skill cannot be overlooked in training.

A suggestion for coaches who might not feel comfortable demonstrating it and thus, might not spend time on it, is to have a current female player or a player on the team that does it well demonstrate it. We have a desperate need to spend a great deal of time striking balls with the instep with both feet correctly. Lindsay Tarpley and Heather O'Reilly spent hours striking balls with their instep both in finishing and long balls (with both feet), and they made dramatic improvements. Lindsay Tarpley's strike with her instep from 30 yards against Brazil helped the United States win a gold medal. She practiced that exact shot every day. This skill needs to be trained at every age level, and it needs to be taught correctly at younger ages.

Dribbling:

The United States has been known for having legendary 1v1 artists, such as Carin Gabarra and Mia Hamm. We have developed slashing 1v1 dribblers in our country. Dribbling for possession is a component of dribbling that we have not developed at the

same rate. Dribbling with change of direction and creativity in order to keep the ball and allow more numbers to get forward is the next step for us. Brazil is known for their dribbling ability, both beating players 1v1 and keeping possession. Their comfort level with all surfaces of both feet, in particular the sole of their feet, is exemplary. They use deception, creative quick touches, and change of direction to offset their defender, and they accomplish this at speed. An American trademark is to go forward, which is a great strength if the game dictates it. To often, we dribble or pass forward when it is not on and consequently we unnecessarily lose possession. Some ideas to train this component are in the above section entitled "receiving."

Service:

Germany showed in the 2003 World Cup and the 2004 Olympics that one of their strengths as a nation is service—both flank service (end line and early service) and final passing. In residency preparations for the Olympics, the U.S. Women's National Team spent a great deal of time in both these service areas. In the 2003 Women's World Cup, we got around Germany several times, but our service from the flanks was too often to the goalkeeper; in 2004, we beat Germany in the semi-finals of the Olympics on a goal from end line service away from the goalkeeper.

Regarding end line service, our players need to be able to find a player in the box with an appropriate ball away from the goalkeeper. This can be trained with and without defenders. One run we added to the near, far, and slot runs was a run referred to as the "4 hole." It's a run toward the near area of the goal, about 10 yards out. Players need to be able to serve every kind of ball, ideally with both feet, so time must be spent on this skill, at speed. The important aspects of early service that players tend to have problems with are the quality of the ball and the accuracy of the ball. The ball needs to be driven (the game dictates whether it can be on the ground or if it needs to be in the air) and needs to be served behind the defense so they are running back to their own goal. Coaches need to spend time in the attacking third for us, as a nation, to keep progressing.

In 2003, Aly Wagner was the best and maybe only true final passer on the team. The coaching staff spent an enormous amount of time on improving our players' ability to hit quality final passes more consistently and on developing more players to be able to serve high level final balls. The important components of the final pass are the ability to texture/bend balls, the ability to serve balls both on the ground and in the air (with back spin so it dies behind the defense), and the appropriate pace of the serve. Often times, players serve final balls that run to the goalkeeper or out of bounds because they are too heavy or too straight. Coaches need to create environments to get constant repetition on bending balls with all surfaces of the feet on the ground and in the air, serving soft balls with back spin in the air, and serving balls with the appropriate pace that lead the runner perfectly. This will aid in improving the technique of final passing. Small-sided end zone games or games with off sides lines will contribute to improving this skill in a game-like setting with repetitions.

It is vital to train areas that will improve our teams and our players between both penalty boxes, but there is also a high demand of work that needs to be done in the penalty boxes. Flank service and final passing are sophisticated techniques that require a tremendous amount of quality repetition and settings to train execution in game-like environments.

Tackling:

Every coach would name passing, receiving, heading, dribbling, and finishing as techniques, but many would omit tackling. The need to develop more ball winners in America is resounding. We spent all of 2004 trying to find a back up to Shannon Boxx, our ball winner in the midfield, in the event of an injury. We evaluated several players in that role, but no one in the entire country compared to Boxx. The addition of Boxx to the team in 2003 filled an enormous defensive hole in the midfield and reminded all of us why we need to continue to develop tackling ability in players.

The techniques of block tackling, slide tackling, and toe poking, and teaching environments when to and when not to tackle are crucial to incorporate in team training. Some coaches might believe that tackling is solely about mentality, which is an important element of tackling, but it is a skill as well. There are correct and incorrect ways to tackle and times to tackle that need to be taught. The proper slide tackle technique can destroy an opponent's chance, reduce the amount of corner kicks teams concede, and turn a defending play into an attacking transition. When was the last time you taught slide tackling?

Finishing:

How many times in soccer does a team out-shoot another and lose? It tends to happen often, especially to American teams. The reason for this might be that we create so many more chances than other teams that we lack the focus required on a consistent basis because players feel they'll get more opportunities. This might have been the case in the nineties, but parity in the game has lessened this occurrence from happening so often. On the whole, foreign countries need far fewer chances and finish more opportunities. We, in America, need to improve our ability to get more shots on the frame and raise our overall finishing percentage in order to win the games we dominate.

The different types of finishing are: breakaway finishing, long range finishing, finishing off serves in the air (heading, volleying, half-volleying, side-volleying), finishing off serves on the ground, inside of the foot finishing, bending the ball around the goalkeeper, against the grain finishing and half-chance finishing. Finishing should be trained both as purely technical and in game-like environments. High amounts of repetition are critical for improvement and can be accomplished in circuits, small group training sessions, and functional training during practice. Going to goal as often as possible in training can also add repetitions that otherwise might not have existed. Many coaches plan to do finishing at the end of the session, and if they run over, that seems to be the thing that is eliminated. Another option is the start your season and sessions with finishing.

Tactics and Trends of Teams & Players in the Olympics

All coaches look at systems of play as evidence of the game's progress and motivation to switch or create a new system. It's fascinating to evaluate world events, as each World Cup and Olympics unveils new trends in systems and team play. In recent competitions, the women's game has seen tremendous growth in new systems and precise execution of the more 'classic' systems utilized to achieve success. The system(s) of choice can enhance the team's position to succeed, as various systems thrive as a result of their country's culture or players. For example, Brazil prides

themselves on great individuality; hence they prefer to play with 3 forwards. Germany's culture and tradition almost dictate that they will play in a 4-4-2, and at every world event they do and it works very well for them, while the USA's educational system and perhaps our coaching culture opens doors for consideration of a myriad of systems. As the Technical Director, I'm often asked why not "dictate" a system for club, youth national, state and regional ODP teams. The answer is simple, with a myriad of reasons: A) why limit ourselves to one system? B) The very foundation of America is our diversity. Let's use our diversity as a strength so that our players are comfortable playing in many systems. C) Good players need to be able to play the game first, and within a system second. Understanding the principles of play is the first key to being able to play at the highest level. D) Why pigeonhole our country to play one system, thus making it easier to scout and defeat the US? E) Why not be unpredictable, thus enabling us to use a myriad of systems in our repertoire as strengths? And finally, imagine the developmental chaos if youth players were only exposed to one system in their critical tactical years. It should be noted that systems are only as good as the players playing in them, and the truly best systems are the ones that seek to highlight teams' and players' strengths and disguise teams' and players' weaknesses. No system ever won a game – players win games!

Systems

The dominant system used during this Olympics was a 4-4-2 (4 backs, 4 midfielders and 2 forwards). Virtually every team used this classic system, at one point or another during the tournament. USA, Germany, Japan, China and Nigeria all used the 4-4-2 as their 'primary' system of choice. This trend started 2 years ago when the USA, limited by the pool of forwards, and needing to play 4 rather than just 3 in the midfield against teams who used 5, decided to use 4 central midfielders and two forwards to maximize the highest performing players at the time. Throughout the Olympics, we saw several different formations within the 4-4-2. USA, Japan, Sweden, and Nigeria all played with a diamond in the midfield, while Germany and China played flat across their midfields. The second most common system in the women's game today is the 4-5-1 that flexes into a 4-3-3 on the attack. It's interesting to note that during the Olympics, only Australia and Greece played it. However, Norway made the system successful and other countries followed suit, such as Canada, France, China, and others. The 4-3-3 system was played successfully by Brazil (only against the USA), Sweden, and the USA during these Olympics. The USA started in a 4-3-3 against Japan and against Brazil in the finals. We also switched to a 4-3-3- in the first game against Brazil. Finally, Brazil and Mexico employed a system not seen in the women's game since 1995, the classic sweeper with markers. And, for all of Brazil's games except against the USA, they played in a 3-4-3 (two markers and a deep sweeper), and in every game they preferred playing in a dangerous 3 front system.

All systems are good systems – the key to their success is how the system fits its players and how the players play. The women's game has seen tremendous growth technically and tactically over the last 5 years, and one of the most profound impacts on teams' successes has been the effectiveness of players in the various systems chosen by coaches. Germany may always be suited to play a 4-4-2, Brazil will likely always play with a sweeper and markers, and the USA will hopefully always be the team that evolves with the game and chooses a system that fits the highest performing players at the time. Regardless, the best teams lead the way for other countries to emulate. After the '91 world cup, many countries began playing with 3 forwards

because the US was so successful; after '95, teams began employing Norway's flat back four system; and currently, we see numerous teams playing a diamond in the midfield of a 4-4-2, like the USA. Pick the system that best suits your team's players, not your comfort level in coaching a particular system. Develop your team's understanding of all the system's nuances, and then select a secondary system that your team can switch to for various tactical reasons (such as up a goal, down a goal, struggling in the midfield, etc.). Keep in mind that it is very difficult for most teams to switch from one system to another without a transitional lag time. The US women have been switching systems within games and from one game to another for many years now. It wasn't always seamless, but the lessons were there for us to build upon.

Flexibility: almost every team in the Olympic tournament demonstrated the ability to play in more than one system. However, only the USA and Sweden seemed to proactively choose two systems, while other teams usually switched their system as a tactical decision often late in a game to either regain a goal or hang onto a lead. The USA used a 4-4-2 with a diamond midfield, a 4-3-3 with 2 low center midfielders and 1 high one, and at the end of the two over-time games against Germany and Brazil, we used a 4-5-1. Sweden spent the year 2004 experimenting with a 4-3-3 (the 4-4-2 has been their staple system for more than a decade). The end result wasn't an Olympic gold medal, but it certainly made them more difficult to prepare for and adjust to. Brazil prefers to play in a 3-4-3 but is very competent in adjusting to a team that plays a 3 front by dropping one of their midfielders onto the back line to play a 4-3-3. Three of the final 4 teams showed great 'flex-ability' and transition in using 2 systems. Why play two systems? Doesn't it just confuse players? Perhaps initially, however, in the end, having a primary system allows your players to master that system and play at their highest level, while having a secondary system gives your team the tactical advantage of being able to adjust to the demands of the opponent or game.

Altering style, not changing the system: Several teams showed great sophistication in being able to alter their style of play without making a change to their system of play. Germany is renown for their possession and combination play, yet if the game requires it or they believe there is a tactical advantage to changing their style, Germany can and will play long balls and a direct counter-attacking style through Prinz (#9). Sweden is Germany's greatest rival in demonstrating a balance of direct and indirect play; we saw this in both the Olympics and World Cup. Mostrom (#6) and Oestberg (#8) will play make, while Svensson (#11) and Ljungberg (#10) can play to feet or have the pace and tactical savvy to counter. Japan is another team that can possess the ball or play numerous balls at their opponent's restraining to get behind defenders, thus being dangerous and unpredictable. And finally, the USA has become better at altering our attacking style based on what our opponent is doing; however, our best ability to alter our style is on the defensive end of the game. We are one of the only teams that confront teams at a variety of positions on the field, playing either a high, medium, or low-pressure defense.

Trends

Technical:

Receiving - Solving Pressure, Dribbling: Brazil's individual ability to 'receive the ball at speed' with their first, second, third, and fourth touches into space and away from pressure was electrifying to watch. And trust me, we on the USA team and bench spent

a few games watching their prowess. Every player on the roster is comfortable receiving the ball with any and every surface. It's as if they have velcro on their feet, chest, quads, and even their head. Take a tape of any one of Brazil's games and make a highlight video for your team to watch tonight. That tape can serve as the role-model for 'receiving under pressure' and inspire our next generation of young players to prioritize their training so that we can produce players with Brazil-like levels of confidence and competence on the ball.

The two most striking differences between the USA and Brazil in the finals were how the teams solved pressure. US players solve pressure with 1-3 touches, quite often relying on good support and dynamic movement off the ball from a teammate, otherwise known as 'team play.' Brazilians, on the other hand, don't really need teammates to solve pressure. A Brazilian's idea of pressure arrives after the 4th defender arrives. The art of dribbling was elevated to a new height never before seen in the women's game by the young and talented Brazilian, Marta (#10). We must look for ways to encourage this creative dribbling in our players without punishing them for taking too many touches. Where does 'receiving' end and 'dribbling' begin for a Brazilian? They are capable of taking 5-6 touches, yet the touches are so dynamic, productive, and unpredictable it almost always results in a penetrative pass or shot, as well as maintains possession so that the team can advance more numbers into the attack. It should be noted that the USA is renowned for '1v1 personalities' such as Mia Hamm and Carin Gabarra. Hamm is the best penetrative dribbler the world has ever seen, and penetration is the key to scoring. However, the next level of development in our personality players is developing the creative dribbler who can open something up when it looks shut down, as well as penetrate like a hot knife through butter. After all, how do you teach defenders to stop a player who has such a fluid and elegant touch on the ball as Marta?

Service – instep, end line, flank, and final pass: Service has often been a technique that players overlook in their development. Particularly, there doesn't seem to be a sense of excellence and pride in one's ability to play a ball consistently with both feet or with the next play of the ball in mind. Aly Wagner is a great final passer. The pace and accuracy of her service is exquisite. And, Brazil's Marta is the single best dribbler with vision and the technical ability to serve the final pass the women's game has ever seen. Mia Hamm and Kristine Lilly both serve good balls with both feet - driven, bent, or floated. It seems to take players on the WNT several years in the team before they acquire the ability to strike long balls with their instep accurately, shoot the ball with their instep with power, and serve a cross with the appropriate pace, accuracy, and flight pattern. Quite often our younger or newer players are many years behind in their technical development of ball striking. In these Olympics, we saw the USA team make remarkable progress in the area of service, as compared to the World Cup just 10 months earlier. Two great examples are Foudy's early service to Lilly against Australia and Hamm's end line service to O'Reilly against Germany for the game winner. Several players emerged as magnificently proficient with their instep. Shannon Boxx's ability to strike a moving ball with either foot and get the shot on the frame is statistically stunning, and her ability to change the point with a 50-yard ball is remarkable. The first goal we scored in the tournament was a fine example of Boxx's ability, and yet we've seen her do that time and time again. Birgit Prinz, Germany (#9) is marvelously competent in striking the ball, serving the box, or changing the point with both feet. The Chinese and Japanese players' technique is textbook. A fine example of remarkable improvement in the use of her instep during residency training was Lindsay Tarpley

(#5). She arrived in January without the ability to strike the ball well with her left foot or consistently and with power with her right foot. Every day, after or before practice, Tarpley worked on power shooting. The goal she scored in the Olympic finals replicated identically the technique she worked on every single day.

Tactical – Attacking:

New Personality Players: These Olympics saw many great new personalities emerge: Marta, Wambach, Japan's Arakawa (#9), and many more from Australia's Walsh (#7) to Mexico's Dominguez (#10). We've tracked others that played extremely well, and if they stay healthy, we know they'll be stars in 2007. Keep an eye on Tarpley, O'Reilly, Brazil's Cristiane (#12) and Rosanna (#11), and Germany's Odebrecht (#6) and Bachor (#14). What we're seeing is an influx of young and highly developed players that are technically, tactically, physically, and psychologically advanced for their years. It's hard to imagine that Marta is only 19 years old, and Abby Wambach is just 23. These are two of the finest players in the world, with many years ahead of them to entertain and elevate the game! Finally, these marvelous individuals have an amazing sense of team play. They are keenly aware that they can take over a game in a moment, and that the defenders they draw often opens up a teammate for a dangerous opportunity. Finally, after the Olympics, FIFA published a "Women's Short List" of the top 21 players in the world to consider for their annual player of the year award. On the list, 11 forwards, 6 midfielders, 1 defender and 3 Goalkeepers were named. The USA had 3 players mentioned (Wambach, Hamm and Lilly), to Brazil's 4 (Marta, Cristiane, Formiga #7 and Pretinha #9), Germany's 2 (Prinz and Lingor #10), and Sweden's 3 (Svensson #11, Ljungberg #10 and Mostroem #6).

Possession/Rhythm: Every team in the Olympics demonstrated a greater ability to maintain possession in their defensive third. The final four teams, however, established the greatest success in possessing the ball in the midfield and attacking thirds of the field. Germany is perhaps the best team in the world in possession. They are so rarely dispossessed in their half of the field. Brazil was the best team as possessing the ball in their opponent's defensive third. A great example (yet painful reminder) of this was their lone goal against the USA. Cristiane held off three US defenders inside our penalty box and then played a ball straight across the 6-yard line for Pretinha (#9) to finish. As compared to the 2003 World Cup, the USA team demonstrated greater composure in the back, more creativity in the midfield, and significantly more patience in possessing the ball with the purpose to get more numbers involved in every attack. As the game continues to evolve, greater possession, less predictable possession, and the impact of possession will be rewarded more on the scoreboard. In today's game, it's still possible for teams to dominate their opponents in possession, create more chances, pepper their opponent's goal with shots, and yet come away without the win. As the technical level improves in the game, so too will the tactical understanding and application. A positive byproduct of this will be a greater level of free flowing, creative, and balanced possession game.

Changing the Point of the Attack & Recreating Width: In looking at team play and the evolution of the women's game over the last several years, more players and teams are able to change the point of their attack through a variety of ways, thus recreating width. Historically, teams used several players and several touches to switch the point of attack from one sideline to another. At these Olympics, we saw several defenders and midfielders serve a 40-50 yard unbalancing ball to the weak side. Most notably, Germany's Hingst (#17) and the USA's Catherine Reddick (#4) - both central defenders

that have the capability to switch it with one accurate and swift pass. In the midfield, players like Boxx (#7) and Brazil's Daniela (#8) demonstrated that under the pressure of being in the center of the field, they could look up and serve a dynamic ball to the opposite flank with either foot, often putting the receiver in behind defenses. At the international level, we're starting to see a gap between players and teams that change the point more consistently. Germany, China, Japan, Brazil, Sweden, and the USA are all able to employ tactics, such as changing the point that other teams cannot because of technical inefficiency. Germany and the USA will switch the attack using two tactics – a combination of players and touches that moves the ball from one flank to another either through the midfield, through the back line, or bouncing a ball off a checking forward, or the lethal long diagonal ball. Brazil, China, and Japan consistently prefer the use of many players and many passes when they look to change the point. The USA has made remarkable progress in the creative qualities in our attacking game. Largely, we can credit time spent together in residency. Having said that, there is still work to do in all areas, technical and tactical, for the American team. Again, the importance of each player arriving at the full-team with a strong technical foundation cannot be overstated. Tactics are a moot point if a player can't execute technically.

Team Play Elevates: The US won the Olympic Gold Medal using 17 of the 18 players, getting goals from 6 different players, playing 6 games, giving up 4 goals, limiting Germany to 2 shots on goal in 120 minutes of play, and being the only team in the tournament to score against Brazil (4 goals). The style of play was a balance of tremendous attacking and defending and reliance upon groups of players to excel in their area of expertise. In a nutshell, total team play. While Wambach lead the team in goals and Hamm is the most famous player in the world, our team relied upon every player, rather than one player, to win games. Brazil was the only other team in the tournament to also play 6 games. They shutout every opponent, except the USA, and scored more goals than any other team in the tournament. What stands out the most about Brazil is their collective brilliance individually. Every player raised her level and sustained it throughout the tournament to elevate Brazil into their first world final. Nigeria also demonstrated for the first time that their players can play on the same page, and subsequently, they advanced farther than expected.

Tactical – Defending:

Organized Back 4's: Every team employed the use of a back line consisting of 4 defenders. Why? A) The gap is closing between the top teams and the second tier teams. In soccer, it's not uncommon for a stronger team to out perform a weaker team yet come out on the losing end. B) Now that women's soccer is gaining international recognition and each nation's national media attention, coaches are under greater pressure to win. C) The space between sidelines is difficult to cover by just 3 women...to name a few reasons. In the end, the women's game is getting more and more organized, and it's showing in the way that teams are putting together their back lines. Teams like the USA and China are squeezing the space attackers have to work with in an effort to apply pressure on the ball and limit time and space for the attack. While teams like Brazil, Japan, Nigeria, Australia, and Mexico are content to concede space in front of their defenders but not behind. Germany and Sweden fluctuate based on the overall pressure they are under within the game. Sometimes we'll see them retreating and other times they're squeezing the space. Brazil (against the USA) and Mexico played 4 at the back, but they played with a sweeper and markers rather than 'flat' like all the other teams in the Olympics. Only Brazil chose to use a 3 back system, yet if they faced

a 3 front, they were forced to adjust. It is said that coaches organize their teams from the back forward and that 'defense wins championships.' If the Olympics were a research study, then we could anecdotally support these two theories. Every team used 4 backs. Brazil and the USA only conceded 4 goals, despite playing more games than the teams in the other two groups.

Sweeper with Markers: Are bell-bottoms and disco coming back? All things are cyclical and indeed we're seeing the sweeper system return to the women's game. Brazil, Nigeria, and Mexico played with a sweeper and either two or three markers. Brazil and Nigeria played with a deeper sweeper, while Mexico's sweeper tended to play in closer support of her markers and often trapped players running into off-sides positions. It's been almost 9 years since teams have regularly faced a sweeper system. Might we see more sweepers in the 2007 Women's World Cup? I suspect we will. What will be interesting to see is if teams play with a sweeper in one system and then flat in another? That would be difficult to pull off because of the radically different principles employed. It is very exciting to ponder, however. It's also interesting to consider how might a more modern use of the sweeper be implemented? I suspect teams may mark vertically, pass players laterally, and the sweeper will flatten out the game at appropriate times. Wait and see.

Low Pressure: As the game has evolved we're seeing more and more teams engaging in a bait and snap approach to the game. Very few teams will high-pressure opponents all over the field. USA, Brazil, and Sweden lead the pack in terms of their preference and confidence they derive from playing high pressure. However, with FIFA's insistence on scheduling games during world events with just 2 days rest, it is not very realistic to think we can play 6 games of high pressure. And, during the course of a game, fatigue inevitably sets in so teams often sit in to weather the storm. Norway led the world in mastering the low pressure and counter game during the '90s. Teams that are often inferior employ the same tactic in the hopes of capitalizing on their few chances, and now we're seeing teams lower their restraining line to prevent conceding space behind their defense, not necessarily just to counter. The USA uses three levels of pressure: high, medium, and low pressure, not to be confused with 100 percent, 75percent and 50 percent effort. The intensity, pressing, and togetherness mentality is always 100 percent; however we'll pick a place on the field to confront opponents based on tactical advantages in doing so. Germany, Japan, and China are all playing low pressure for long stretches of games, if not entire games. The USA played high and low pressure against Brazil in both the first game and the finals. And, we played 120 minutes of low pressure against Germany in the semi-finals.

New Personalities: Shannon Boxx (#7) is the best defensive center midfielder in the world. It's such a demanding and evolving position. Brazil's Daniela (#8) is a very close second. Generally speaking, the defensive center midfielder role has been under developed and under valued in the women's game. Certainly, Akers was a great player that played there in the '99 World Cup to extend her career, but she was a player-maker with skill playing that role, not to be confused with a great defender. Hege Riise for Norway and Bettina Weigman for Germany have also played as the holding midfielders on their respective teams, but like Akers, their primary responsibilities were to play-make in that pocket. Boxx and Daniela are the quintessential defensive center midfielders who play-make, hold, change the field, balance the attack and defense, ball win in the air and on the ground, and help create and/or score goals. These two women are redefining the role and thus elevating it's importance to a team. I can honestly say

that the USA would not have won the Olympic Gold Medal without Shannon Boxx on the field. And conversely, Brazil doesn't get the silver without Daniela, because the other 5-6 forwards and midfielders on their team are almost exclusively interested in attacking. On FIFA's list of the top 21 players in the world to consider for their annual player of the year award, of the defending personalities listed, the USA had 2 players mentioned (Boxx and Scurrey), to Brazil's 0, Germany's 2 (Stegemann #2 and Rottenberg #1), and Sweden's 0.

Summary:

The USA is back on top. We worked hard, smart, and persevered by sticking together. The players deserve the credit and the opportunity to celebrate this great achievement because in the words of one veteran who has played in 4 World Cups and 3 Olympics, "this was by far the most difficult world championship to win." Parity has arrived, the gap is closed, any team can win, and the rest of the world is displaying aspects of the game in which we can take home and develop further. Brazil is exciting and is elevating the game to new heights technically and creatively. Norway, China, and Canada all demonstrated in the last 12 months how quickly one's candle can go dim. Japan, Nigeria, and Australia are all in the hunt to be giant killers. Winning consistently is the most difficult aspect of soccer, yet if we focus on the areas we can control, we will maintain our position as one of the top 3 teams in the world. These Olympic Games provided a platform for the best display ever of attacking and defending in a world event final. Brazil and the USA have set a new standard for all to aspire to achieve. I'd pay money to watch the Olympic finals once again. After every world event, we evaluate and analyze lessons learned, trends, personalities, and systems of play. We now have 3 years to prepare for the 2007 Women's World Cup. It's time to apply the lessons learned.