

Cheers (and whispers) for women's sports

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With the women's national soccer team partying in the World Cup finals like it was 1999, Carli Lloyd leading the way with a historic blink-and-you-missed-it hat trick, culminated by a shocking 54-yard goal that was Steph Curry-esque in its aesthetic and shock value, and almost 5 million more Americans watching the final victory than saw the U.S. men tie Portugal in the 2014 men's World Cup, the country's women's sports fans such as myself should be jumping up and down with unrestrained glee.

Should be, but aren't. Not unrestrained. As has been the case all too often in the course of the glorious rise of American women's sports in the past few years, we find our reasons to celebrate to be reasons to pause and reflect. Just when we want to shout, "Rah! Rah! Rah!" we realize we just might be getting a deal that is raw, raw, raw.

Let's concentrate first on the fun stuff before I go all buzz kill. The 2015 second-ranked U.S. women's soccer team was on a mission. Everything coalesced at exactly the right time. Megan Rapinoe, who came out as lesbian shortly before the London Summer Olympics and will be inducted into the National Gay and Lesbian Sports Hall of Fame with me in Chicago this month, scored two goals in a 3-1 opening round victory against Australia, but clearly the team was not functioning with the offensive efficiency expected. Later in the tournament, coach Jillian Ellis, also a lesbian, juggled the lineup to create more offensive threats in the midfield. That led to a power surge by Lloyd through the rest of the tournament, triggered a 2-0 shutout of first-ranked Germany in the semifinals, and was capped off with a 5-2 blowout against third-ranked Japan in a match that was even more lopsided than the final score would indicate.

Yippee! Nearly 23 million Americans got a chance to see why kick for kick, women's sports are as much fun to watch as men's sports, no matter what troglodytes such as *Sports Illustrated*'s Andy Benoit or ESPN's Colin Cowherd say. Millions of girls got a chance to see the payoff hard work and dedication to the sport can have, giving them role models and goals to fuel their dreams and passions. For a few blessed hours, we were spared ESPN reports on who doesn't want to play with Carmelo Anthony.

And yet ...

Every time those girls watched U.S. goal keeper Hope Solo make another save, they had to wonder what exactly transpired in the domestic abuse incident at her sister's house in which she was charged – or why U.S. Soccer allowed her to play without taking the incident seriously. Sepp Blatter, embattled head of the international soccer federation who never misses a men's World Cup, was nowhere to be seen for this year's women's World Cup. Must be a little difficult making international travel arrangements when you and your entire organization are under multiple criminal investigations for racketeering, corruption, and money laundering; and perhaps it's just as well considering the sexist comments Blatter and the official FIFA website have made about women players. By not being there, Blatter was able to avoid embarrassing questions about why FIFA allowed the matches to be played on

artificial turf (no men's World Cup matches have been played on anything but grass; a lawsuit by women players was unable to force this year's event to be held on grass but did win a return to real grass for the next go round).

Then again, there's the prize money. The U.S. women's team got \$2 million for winning the whole thing, which sounds like a lot until you realize the men's team got four times that much for losing in the first round. Or that the German men got \$35 million for winning their championship. Suddenly a 78-cents on the dollar pay gap doesn't sound so bad.

FIFA obfuscates by saying the prize disparity is because men bring in more revenue. Really? The men into whom you have poured millions and millions of more dollars and marketing over decades? Go figure. Reality is FIFA doesn't pay women equally because to do so would go against the greed and sexism that have been institutional hallmarks of FIFA.

When the U.S. women won in 1999, it was hailed as a sign that Title IX had paid off. Yet since Title IX came into being four decades ago, we've seen a massive displacement of women in the coaching and administrative posts. We've seen Title IX used as an excuse by lazy university administrators to cut diverse sports opportunities for men while continuing to plow millions into concussion-dependent football. We've seen women coaches get paid drastically lower salaries than their male counterparts while being held to stricter standards of conduct, essentially infantilizing the very women athletes they are supposed to empower. We've seen modern day witch hunts against lesbians in sports. We've seen the NBA create the WNBA with the successful intent of driving the women-controlled American Basketball League out of business, enabling the NBA to move women's pro games out of season and pay the players less money, essentially ghettoizing the entire women's sport. We've seen the WNBA players have to endure the naming of alleged sexual harasser Isiah Thomas as president of the New York Liberty.

And then, when Miss Universe contestants emerge looking like progressive world leaders for having the courage to withdraw from any involvement with the sponsorship money of presidential candidate Donald Trump after he accuses Latin American countries of dumping their unwanted rapists and felons on American shores, the LPGA wimps out along with every other golf organization and says we don't like what he says but we're happy to play on his courses.

So, yes, lots to cheer as an American fan of women's sports last weekend. Oh, look – three U.S. women in the quarterfinals at Wimbledon! But even as we cheer, we wish just as wholeheartedly that women would be allowed to take control of their sports and stop letting men fuck things up.