

NATIONAL TEAMERS FEATURED IN THIS SECTION

Michelle Akers

Thori Staples Bryan

Cindy Parlow Cone

Stephanie Cox

Marian Dalmy Dougherty

Crystal Dunn

Stacey Enos

Aдриanna Franch

Mia Hamm

April Heinrichs

Angela Hucles

Ella Masar

Jessica McDonald

Megan Rapinoe

Briana Scurry

Danielle Slaton

Abby Wambach

Saskia Webber

Staci Wilson

Kim Wyant

A Triple-Edged Sword?

All girls face disadvantages, some more than others

1 : GENDER	12
2 : ORIENTATION	22
3 : RACE	33

Kick It Like a Girl

The National Team has Proven Women Have No Limits When it Comes to Competing

MIA HAMM SEEMED CRANKY IN APRIL OF 2018. Not 1992 mad, mind you. Not as pissed off as when Joe Elsmore called her offsides against Duke in the NCAA women’s championship game when her team, North Carolina, was already leading 6-1. Never mind that almost no one understands the offsides rule in soccer. Surely on that day, Joe, a young sneaker and cleat salesman moonlighting as a referee, must have been a fool for the mere suggestion that Mia might have broken the mysterious rule by sneaking a half step behind the Duke defenders. She had already scored three goals in the game, but when you’re attempting to become the best player in the world you never stop trying for more.

Fast forward to this particular spring day in California, more than a quarter century after Mia had begun to launch her sport into the forefront of our collective psyche. The most recognized American soccer player of all time — don’t call her the “best ever” if you want to keep her engaged in the conversation — was annoyed about the double standards that girls still face in relation to boys. The occasion was the gathering of the Positive Coaching Alliance, one of the dozens of organizations dotted across America trying to deal with the two most conflicted forces in youth sports: coaches and parents. “I guarantee you that you will hear more, “Don’t!” and “No!” at a young girls’ practice or game than you will at boys,’” said Mia, doling out advice in the panel discussion that included the father of her three children, the former professional



Mia Hamm, with her husband, Nomar Garciaparra

baseball all-star Nomar Garciaparra. “Boys get encouraged to be personalities, and yet girls get encouraged to be better teammates, rather than be encouraged to express their individuality. That was a constant battle for me when I was young and playing mostly co-ed sports; the boys could be individuals and celebrate like crazy when they scored, but if I did that I was considered a hotdog, a showoff, by the other parents.”

IF MIA WAS PERTURBED in 1992 or 2018, Michelle Akers was positively indignant in the spring of 1975. For physical education class one morning, the boys were sent to the baseball field for a game of kickball; the girls were brought to the playground to play on the swings. “No!” exclaimed Michelle from the park bench in the Seattle suburb of Shoreline. “I am not doing that!” With all the other girls gliding back and forth in dresses with ribbons flowing from their hair, the third-grade teacher, Mrs. Ericsson, was not about to relent to the wild-maned child in blue jeans. “Michelle, if you don’t get on those swings with the other girls, you’re going to the principal’s office.” Michelle roared again. “No! I want to play kickball!” The gray-haired educator, as promised, marched the girl — who would become Mia Hamm’s lifelong nomination as best soccer player of all time — straight back into the principal’s cauldron. “Girls don’t play kickball!” she said.

“I had been there before!” said Michelle with a hearty laugh in 2020, still a towering figure in blue jeans and flannel at the Georgia animal rescue farm she runs with her teenage son, Cody. “I had given a report on sharing day. I was so excited. I wrote my story about how I wanted to be a Pittsburgh Steeler when I grew up; I had my Mean Joe Greene jersey with me. When I finished, the teacher says, ‘Girls don’t play football!’ Well, I was shocked and I defended myself: ‘Yes, they do!’ She says, ‘No, they don’t!’ So I got even louder: ‘Yes. They. Do!’”

Revered among soccer purists the world over for marauding across soccer fields the way Mean Joe played defensive tackle, Michelle knows she’s relatively anonymous these days, especially when compared to the America’s sweetheart with whom she won two World Cups and an Olympic gold medal. But if it was Mia who garnered most of the endorsements and got to play anything you can do I can do better with Michael Jordan in a make-believe televised statement of gender equality for Gatorade in 1997, it was Michelle who put a ragtag group of soccer neophytes on her shoulders and carried them into international soccer respectability.



ERICA LANSNER PHOTO COURTESY OF MICHELLE AKERS

Michelle Akers, on her farm

“I’ve seen a lot of these studies that go out, or these polls that list the best player that’s ever played our game, and it seems that Marta (from Brazil) for some reason always wins that contest,” said Kim Wyant, Michelle’s teammate at the University of Central Florida. Kim has the distinction of starting in the first-ever game as goalie for the U.S. Women’s National Team (see sidebar), which began its official existence at a four-game tournament in Jesolo, Italy, in August of 1985 against England, Denmark and the host country. “I played against Marta. Great player. But let’s be clear: These people don’t know what they’re talking about. There is no one that was ever better than Michelle. No one. I’m sorry. She taught us all how to play, she taught the Chinese, the Italians, everyone, how women can play this game.”

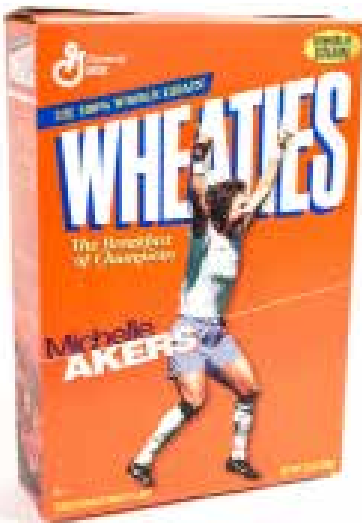
When people attempt to compliment Michelle by saying she “played like a man,” they’d better be out of harm’s way. “I kicked most men’s asses,” she told us in a tone that left little doubt. She was particularly perturbed during our chat about what she sees as an inappropriate softening of physical expectations for girls and women that persists to this day. “At my son’s junior ROTC (Reserve Officers Training Corp), they do a lot of pushups and I always ask questions about it,” said Michelle, with her voice rising. “These men talk to me like I have never done a pushup, or sit-up, and I could do 50 more than they could. Then they tell me they have these certain standards on how they’re graded. For the guy to get an excellent evaluation, he had to do 50 pushups in two minutes. For the girls, it was 10 pushups in two minutes! Why are they keeping the girls down and not challenging them?”

BIOLOGICAL REALITY TELLS US that physical differences exist between the sexes that make average men run faster, jump higher and, yes, grow stronger enough to complete more pushups, than average women. Yet the data shows the chasm isn’t as wide as one might

think — generally only about 10-20 percent — among the best male and female athletes who are either genetically predisposed to compete well or possess the will to get the absolute most of their bodies, or both. It’s the age-old discussion of nature vs. nurture. Are you great in sports because you were born to be, or because you worked hard? In women’s soccer, no one has studied the topic more ferociously or for longer than Albert Anson Dorrance IV, at once the most successful and among the most polarizing male figures in the sport. Born to an American oil company executive living in India, Anson believed the activist author Gloria Steinem and every other contemporary book he had read about women prior to accepting the new position as the head coach of the women’s varsity soccer team at the University of North Carolina in 1979. Just about the only thing he likes more than books, in fact, is debating their content. He has co-authored

several, and has been profiled or mentioned in at least a dozen others.

“I was a product of early 1970s feminism that said men and women are exactly the same,” said Anson, who told us he had been raised in all-male boarding schools and didn’t yet possess much first-hand knowledge about the opposite sex when he added the women’s team to his resume at age 28 after having coached the Tar Heel men for two years prior. “The books said the only reason there were any differences is because of environmental



Are Men and Women Really All That Different?

KIM WYANT HAS ALMOST ALWAYS BEEN IN THE LEAD WHEN IT COMES TO SOCCER. She was a goalie in the first NCAA women's championship game, the first starting goalie of the National Team in 1985, and soon after posted the team's first shutout. She's been playing, and now coaching, almost every day since. With some strong opinions about how to get the most out of today's young athletes, she thinks North Carolina coach Anson Dorrance has it about right. "You've got to have this level of authenticity with them, and transparency, and you have to develop a certain level of trust," said Kim. "Until I show my players that I care about them as a person, and they know that in their hearts, I can't get them to move in the direction that I want them to go."



COURTESY OF NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

Kim Wyant, far right, with the New York University men's team

and hours taking a massive interest in their lives." Kim, however, stands alone in another category: she became the only current female head coach of an NCAA men's soccer team when New York University hired her in 2015. She is among numerous coaches — and the one with the most first-hand experience — who told us the psychological differences between males and females are dissolving, or maybe they were never that pronounced in the first place.

Said another way: Maybe Anson Dorrance, with his 22 national women's championships to show for it, is spot on with his views about women, coaches and trust. In 12 years of coaching the University of North Carolina men, however, his best outcome was a single Atlantic Coast Conference title. That suggests to some in soccer that he didn't understand men as well as he would come to understand women. "I've coached a lot of young women in my time and, let me tell you some of those women are really tough, tough players to coach in terms of being demanding and outspoken, and elbowing each other for room on the leadership level," said Kim. "I've had to separate female players in fights, pull them off each other. Same on the male side. So, yes, there may be subtle differences between men and women, but they're not as drastic as one might think."

influences. I thought, "This is great; the fact that men and women are the same will clearly make coaching women easy for me because I was very comfortable coaching men."

Anson has a habit of telling people that his early results in coaching North Carolina women were "disastrous," even if the record of his first four years, 73-9, didn't exactly look that way on paper. He admits he yelled a lot, barked orders, and made generally impersonal commands toward his players, just as he would do with his men's team, and just as the

Today's players, she explained, are more sensitive than ever. "These kids lived through the great recession; they've seen their parents maybe lose their homes, maybe lose their jobs," she said. "There's a skepticism rampant among these kids about everything, about what the government does, what any leaders do. So you, as a coach and a leader, have to spend hours

generals would behave in his most favored books detailing the military. He was obsessive about giving women the same opportunity to compete as men — the birth of his first child, Michelle, caused Anson to miss the first-ever North Carolina women’s soccer game, Sept. 12, 1979 — yet he was perplexed when some women left his practices and game fields in tears. “When I coached men, I consciously tried to dominate them with my personality, to fire them up with the intensity of my voice,” he told one of his biographers.

Then, in October of 1982, Anson was tipped off about a player another coach had just seen at a club soccer tournament at Brown University. His recruiting budget in those days

INSPIRATION: GENDER

COMPETE WITHOUT APOLOGY

Since 1985, the members of the National Team have redefined how the nation, and the world, perceives females in the previously male dominated world of team sports. Here is some perspective from the professionals for today’s aspiring competitors:

NO HOLDS BARRED — “When I joined the National Team it changed my life being surrounded by other women who were like me who wanted to compete, who wanted to sweat, who wanted to tear someone’s head off,” said **Kristine Lilly** (USWNT 1987-2010). “We were taught it was OK to try to win and not feel bad about it. And those are the lessons that I want my girls to feel — like they can do anything.”

NICE ISN’T ALWAYS NECESSARY — “I try to teach girls to accept and take direction and criticism,” said **Janine Szpara** (USWNT 1986-87). “That’s hard for a lot of girls because we’re not indoctrinated into a culture of accepting criticism, and of being accepting of that person that’s pushing them. Society typically speaks to girls in different ways by saying, ‘Hey, we need you to be loving and caring and sensitive.’ And the other message they get is to be nicer to each other. It’s a constant reinforcement of characteristics that society wants out of girls — and sometimes girls just need to ignore all of that.”

PLAYING WITH THE BOYS — “Everyone says that boys are bigger, faster, stronger and

quicker,” said Tiffany Weimer, who played with youth national teams and professionally from 2006-2019. “Well, some boys are, and that’s why I think girls should be playing with them, especially when they’re younger, to get faster, stronger and quicker themselves.”

NO EXCUSES — “My parents told me they never wanted me to use gender as a crutch, to say I couldn’t do something because I was a girl,” said **Lauren Cheney Holiday** (USWNT 2007-2015). “They wanted me to show the world it didn’t matter if I was a boy, or a girl.”

IF YOU CAN’T HACK IT, LEAVE — “I’m glad my Dad had this philosophy whenever I came running into the house saying, ‘The boys are being mean, or they’re too tough, or they’re not letting me play,’” said **Tiffany Roberts Sahaydak** (USWNT 1994-2003). “He didn’t have any sympathy. He’d say, ‘Then go do something else.’ It taught me to roll up my sleeves and get tougher. My Mom, on the other hand, was from the Filipino culture where they value beauty. She had these visions of me being in the entertainment industry and had me take singing lessons. I was terrible!”

didn't allow for much more than phone calls, but that February he scratched together the money for a plane ticket to Colorado where the young woman lived. In a scene reminiscent of Marla Hooch's workout in "A League of Their Own," Anson first watched April Heinrichs play soccer in a high school gym because it was way too cold and snowy to play outside. The fire and fury of this 19-year-old woman, then playing freshman basketball for a local community college, was like nothing he had ever seen in a female, or male.

Though Anson didn't know it at the time, she had dreamed of a soccer scholarship for years. Born April Minnis, the fifth of five sisters with four different fathers involved, April never knew her own biological father and was left to be raised by her step-father, a firefighter named Mel Heinrichs, when she was 15. "I found a note on the kitchen counter from my mother, who had left in the middle of the night," April told us. "She wrote that I would be better off with Mel, and she was probably right." Sports had long been April's emotional and physical outlet, her potential pathway to a far better life, but she held off from committing too quickly to her new college suitor — who was one of the few people in the country of that era offering women money to kick a ball. Anson would call and promise scholarship dollars and playing time and she would reply with the question: "Does your team get along?" He'd call again and again, and each time she'd ask about team chemistry.

"I told her they got along great, but the truth is I realized I didn't know and didn't care," said Anson, who would become the National Team's head coach from 1986-1994 in addition to his duties at North Carolina. "It's not something I had ever thought about when coaching a men's team; it's not something I cared about when I played." Through that spring, as the recruiting dance continued, April's question began to open a window into female sports psychology that he'd only begun to suspect: Maybe Gloria Steinem and the feminists weren't exactly right. Women, he said, would generally respond better to his criticisms if he worked hard to make them trust him first. "It turns out that it's sort of this liberal myth that everyone wants to cling to that men and women are exactly the same," said Anson, who knows his views can be highly controversial. "We all live on a spectrum of behavior, but the psychological differences between the sexes are actually quite profound."

BY THE FALL OF 1983, with 11-year-old Mia Hamm still playing tackle football and every other sport she could find in Texas with the boys, and high school sophomore Michelle Akers dominating on adult male and female soccer teams in and around Seattle, the future DNA code of the U.S. Women's National Soccer team was already spawning on the campus of the University of North Carolina. What Anson named "the Competitive Cauldron," initially forged around April Heinrichs' desire to win everything — from the sprints, the passing drills, and the one-on-one matchups, to the pushups, sit-ups and crunches — has



National Teamers Megan McCarthy, Tracey Bates Leone and April Heinrichs in Haiti in 1991

become the stuff of legend in women's sports. Anson has since told variations of the same story in hundreds of speeches in the past nearly four decades:

"When I watched April's first preseason practice in 1983, I was in shock. From the first minute this woman was an absolute shark. She chewed everyone up. She didn't care what anyone thought of her. She had no hesitation at any minute against any player. She was going to win. It didn't matter what it took. She was going to bury every player. I was ecstatic!"



REUTERS/ANDY CLARK/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Head coach April Heinrichs with Mia Hamm in 2003

her coach were a dynamic duo, one that would shape the attitude and spirit of the National Team likely forever. April was injured for that first four-team tournament in Italy in 1985, and Mia was still too young, but by the time April teamed with Michelle and Mia and 14 others in 1991, they would fulfill Anson's vision and beat Norway in China to become the first-ever champions of a women's World Cup. So what if barely anyone in the United States noticed, or that chronic knee injuries would force her into retirement by age 27, long before the American public started filling stadiums for women's soccer. April knew she helped her coach open doors for women to compete that will never close.

He's an "intellectual giant," she said, with a remarkable ability to take subtle cues from women that can help teams win games, in Anson's case more than 1,000 and counting. But she contends that Anson does get one thing wrong when he gives that well-worn speech.

Soon, Anson said, the upperclassmen would be lining up at his office door. "What are we going to do about April?" they asked their coach, hoping for intervention. Bemused, he answered with a question: "Clone her?" The coach also finally understood the significance of April's constant question about team chemistry. If the Tar Heels didn't get along prior to her arrival, she knew it would only get worse with her style of play in the mix. She knew that cliques, the smaller groups that can form within teams, can be destructive. She also knew that some young women resisted competing in practice against teammates they considered friends — she had experienced that all her life to that point on the sports fields and courts of Colorado and had to find boys and men to play against instead — and that creating a culture of winning required a heavy dose of the masculine energy typically attributed to boys' and men's teams.

Looking back, April believes she and



COURTESY OF JOANNA LOHMAN

Joanna in Botswana

Shoes Mean More the Farther I Travel

MEMORIES DON'T GET MUCH BETTER THAN 1992 FOR ME. As fifth-graders, my buddies were kings of the elementary school hill, I was always the first-picked tomboy queen of their playground, and I was blissfully unaware of all the issues of gender, race and religion about to hit me across the forehead in years to come. I did, however, think I already understood something about socio-economic status: the boys all had Air Jordans and I didn't. "Please Mom! Please!" I pleaded. "Dad! Dad! Dad! I'm begging you!" They knew well enough that, at age 10, I'd outgrow the cultural badges of honor in about two months. But I was persistent. And man, when my besties, Curtis and Joharri, saw me glide into school with my new pair of kicks, they lit up. I was a girl living large in the boys' world and I don't think I'd ever been any happier.

Nearly a quarter-century later and halfway around the world, that memory would gain new perspective. The privilege of my American birth and refinement of those playground skills had afforded me an amazing career that, along the way, took me to more than 40 countries. Professional seasons in Spain, Sweden, Cyprus, Japan and the U.S. were sandwiched around sports diplomacy programs in India, Malaysia, Argentina, Thailand, Indonesia, Botswana, Côte d'Ivoire, Niger, and Nigeria. I have used soccer to battle sex trafficking, promote conflict resolution, and keep kids off the streets. Most of all, I've been able to use my stature in the game to help improve the plight of females, as I was trying desperately to do on behalf of a state department program known as Girl Power on Nov. 8, 2016. When I arrived at the soccer field, just as the girls from the local village were being bused in, the sun was blazing. The air was stagnant and humid; the thermometer might have read 100 degrees, but the heat index must have been 110. One by one, as they stepped off onto the scorched earth that served as a soccer field, I realized they had no shoes. None whatsoever. Their feet, almost literally, were on fire.

Alas, there is no Michael-Jordan-appearing-with-free-shoes happy ending to this story. We just played soccer despite the swelter, with girls from Africa in jaw-dropping wonderment of what a Jo-hawked woman from America could teach them to do with a ball. I left them in awe of their resilience, reminded that I've been so damn fortunate. But I left there, too, with memories that haunt me to this day. Until we live in a world where every girl has the same opportunities as boys, we have so much more work to do. — J.L.

She did care what people thought of her; having your mom leave town when you're a high school freshman will do that to you. "The way Anson portrays it, I was friendless at North Carolina, but I had very good close friends on the team and I'm still close with a couple of them today," said April, who would be named the female player of the decade for the 1980s in the U.S. and later became the first woman ever elected to the National Soccer Hall of Fame. With 35 goals in only 46 National Team games, she still holds the highest goals-per-game average of any woman who has scored more than two. "I do think what myself and my teammates taught Anson about coaching women is that you can be demanding, you can set expectations, you can challenge women, you can raise the bar, then raise it again — and then raise the bar again — and you can communicate with women in a direct manner. If you treat women with respect, then they can be all in on the team and competition concept."

THERE WAS, ULTIMATELY, AT LEAST ONE KEY PERSON paying attention to that 1991 World Cup and the world of women's soccer in general. Remember that referee in the NCAA championship game? Joe Elsmore didn't need any convincing that women could and should compete on equal footing with the men. He had been a soccer player himself, all-conference



COURTESY OF JOE ELSMORE

Referee Joe Elsmore, right, with Mia Hamm in the foreground in the 1992 college national championship game

at North Carolina State, after growing up in the town of Kearny, N.J., which prides itself on the self-anointed moniker Soccertown USA. He considered a North Carolina women's game a plum, albeit exhausting, assignment. "You can tell right away who is the best player, the fastest, the most aggressive, the goal scorer, the vocal leader," said Joe, who had started his professional career selling soccer equipment at his

own sporting goods store. Trying to keep up with the woman who was the focal point of the game taught him that the line between elite male and female athletes was razor thin. "What happened with Mia and me through the years is that, as a referee, I had to be close to her when she got the ball because people are constantly trying to foul her. Every time she touched the ball the crowd would get up out of their seats; you could feel the tension. Through all of that, we developed this great rapport on the field."

Unbeknownst to Mia, Joe's career had been progressing — and he had been formulating an idea that he wanted to bring to his new bosses at Nike. He approached her at the end of the championship game and handed her his business card. "Before you make your

next move in life, promise me you'll call Nike," he said. Though the company was at the top of the footwear world, riding the popularity of another Tar Heel alum named Jordan, it wasn't even involved with women's soccer products at the time. Joe was in sales, traveling store to store in retail management, with absolutely nothing to do with marketing or product development. He was playing several hunches: that girls were ready to compete on the soccer fields across America and the rest of the world, that Mia Hamm was the one that would show them how, and that he could somehow convince Nike to buy in.

"There's just something about this girl that we need to connect with," he told the sultans of the swoosh after a flight to the company headquarters in Oregon. Most of them had no idea who he was. "She needs to be part of

our brand, part of our company . . . and lead us." The man who would help launch millions of girls' soccer dreams waited for what seemed an eternity until a Nike executive named Steven Miller came back into the room with a directive: "Go ahead, Joe, and figure out how to get it done." Twenty-eight years later, in Beaverton, Ore., the largest structure on the largest sporting goods campus in the world is known as the Mia Hamm building — where a former youth soccer player from Colorado holds staff meetings. Product manager Marian Dalmy Dougherty was just 13 years old the first time Joe Elsmore's discovery appeared in a national television advertisement for Nike. "Mia changed everything," said Marian, who would go on to play 11 games herself for the National Team from 2007-2009. "I think it gave every single girl hope that she could be something more than what we thought we had to be, which was a man. To have Mia Hamm as an icon, for girls to look up to? I'm not even sure there are words strong enough to articulate what that means." 🇺🇸



ELIZA SCHEER

National Teamer Marian Dalmy Dougherty, with senior Nike executive Joe Elsmore at the Mia Hamm Building in Oregon

‘You Can’t Win Without the Gays’

After Building a Culture of Acceptance, the National Team Inspires the Current Generation of Youth to be Comfortable in Personal Expression

S OCCER, FOR MELINA DE LA CRUZ GONZALEZ, had always been her happy place with her father. While many of the girls in her extended family were content to watch the men and boys play, Melina jumped into the games whenever they would let her. By age 12, however, she began growing increasingly distant from her parents, who were in the midst of a divorce. With her body changing and her mind struggling to process new feelings, she began staying behind at the neighborhood park when her family left the games and headed back to their home in East Harlem in the evenings. Her first drink of alcohol that summer seemed like no big deal. Most nights, she was still hanging out with the boys who found their joy in kicking a ball. On other nights, though, the drinking soon escalated, as did the behavior of her expanding, fractured circle of late-night companions. Melina would have liked to have gone home and talked to her deeply religious parents about her realization that she was having romantic feelings for girls and not boys, but was certain they would reject her immediately.

“I kind of felt like that if I had come out at that time, it would affect the divorce in a certain way,” she said. “I felt like I was the reason my parents were having all those problems.” Throughout middle school she drank more and attended school less. By age 14 in 2015, with her father’s own alcohol addiction worsening, Melina had joined a New York City gang, often chased through city streets and fearing for her life — yet still rationalized that was easier than owning up to her identity and dealing with chaos at home. “I felt like my mom wasn’t going to accept me and my father and brother weren’t going to accept me, so I kind

of felt like I had no other place.” At one of her lowest points, after lying drunk and bloodied on the pavement with a broken arm, a cousin brought Melina to Saturday Night Lights, run by New York City Football Club and City in the Community. The violence prevention and youth development program, funded by the Manhattan District Attorney’s office, offers soccer in a safe environment for thousands of young people during evening hours when crime levels are at their highest.

Melina loved it. Surrounded by girls her own age, she didn’t need to wait for the precious moments when the boys invited her to sub in. “It gave me a chance to actually play the game and communicate with females, and see other females who work with you and not

COURTESY OF NEW YORK CITY FOOTBALL CLUB



Melina de la Cruz Gonzalez, in New York City

against you,” she said. “That’s when I realized how fun it was.” Unfortunately for Melina, however, Saturday was just one day of the week. On the other days, her alcohol addiction tightened its grip. She was missing more classes than she attended, showing up at home only at sunrise if at all. When she came to play soccer one Saturday, staggering and slurring her words, organizers later found her passed out on the floor of the women’s restroom.

THE STATISTICS IN AMERICA STILL PAINT A GRIM PICTURE of the outlook of teenage members of the LGBTQ+ community, where suicide rates are up to four times higher than the general population. The Human Rights Campaign compiled data that shows more than 40 percent of these young people feel shunned by their families and neighborhoods, and LGBTQ+ children are only half as likely as their straight peers to participate in organized sports like soccer. More than 70 percent of LGBTQ+ youth feel sports are not welcoming of their differences, which is why 83 percent of gay males and 63 of lesbian females keep their sexual orientation private while playing youth sports.

Abby Wambach grew up believing her personal choices were no one’s business but hers, either. When she dated a boy from McQuaid Jesuit High School while attending the all-girls Our Lady of Mercy High School in Rochester, N.Y., she snuck around like most teenagers, keeping her parents, six siblings and most friends on a no-need-to-know basis when it came to the most intimate details. When she dated women at the University of

Warriors are Born by Taking Baby Steps

IN 2003, MY SENIOR YEAR OF COLLEGE, I was coming off a great four-year career on the Penn State soccer team. I was a three-time All-American, one of three finalists for the MAC Hermann trophy awarded to the player voted the best in the nation. Already having played multiple games for the National Team, I seemingly had all the ingredients of the American dream in my grasp — even the long blonde hair and the husband-to-be. I was also curious. Maybe . . . probably . . . definitely, and I had been for a long time. As boxing champion Mike Tyson once said, “We all have a plan until we get punched in the mouth.” For me, that moment was my first date with a woman. Bam! I joke now, all these years later, that I got hit by the proverbial “gay stick.” Step one: break up with the guy. Step two: tell the parents.

I remember it like it was yesterday; my mother and I were walking around my neighborhood and she, acting on intuition, asked if my teammate had a crush on me. “Yes,” I said, stunned. “Do you have feelings for her?” she asked. I knew I had to be honest: “I think I do, Mom.”

Various takes on that conversation, with me trying to explain how whole and alive I now felt, lasted for months afterward. Then Mom told Dad and the topic was never raised again until months later when my father walked into my bedroom one

night in tears. He had lost me, he said. In a way, I realized in those moments, he was right. There’s no sugar-coating it when you shatter your parents’ dreams; those conversations — the ones where you establish your true identity as gay or straight, man or woman, athlete or not — can send mothers and fathers into a painful process of mourning the person they thought they had created.

Our bond, however, hadn’t gone anywhere. I assured my father I was his same daughter and I promised I would include him in my journey of self-discovery. “I love you, Jo,” and “I love you Dad” had never been more true. I credit both my parents; they took it well, without much time to dwell, as I came flying out of the closet — giving media interviews years before it became more commonplace among my peers. Two decades later, I have to pinch myself to remember I wasn’t born draped in a rainbow flag while sporting a baby mohawk. Becoming the “Rainbow Warrior” was my destiny, one that started with that first coming-out step. — J.L.



Joanna, with her father, Steve

COURTESY OF JOANNA LOHMAN

Florida, she comfortably came out to teammates in a truth-or-dare type drinking game, but otherwise let other people on campus make their own assumptions. At 5-foot-11 and more muscular than most women, she usually let it slide when she heard the occasional offending comment. One afternoon, though — as detailed in her best-selling 2016 memoir “Forward” — she let a 300-pound Gator football player know exactly what was on her mind about his homophobic remark:

“I don’t recall what he said but I’ll never forget his tone, the snide veneer coating his words . . . I hear a silent whistle and I’m off, scorching the field with my feet, running at him with all I have, as if each step might be my last. He’s on bended knee, studying his

foot, and doesn't even hear me coming until I'm on top of him, knocking him over and belly-flopping onto his chest. I am near feral, teeth bared, kicking and growling as we flip and fumble across the grass, and when he finally escapes, scrabbling away, I rise up and think: Victory."

Like Melina de la Cruz Gonzalez, Abby began to turn to alcohol more frequently to numb a deep pain as her career progressed. On the field, she was shining, teaming with her childhood hero Mia Hamm with the Washington Freedom for the championship of the Women's United Soccer Association. Abby would help the United States send Mia off to retirement with an Olympic gold medal in 2004, and emerge as a team leader for the next 11 years in which she amassed more goals than any woman or man to that point in history. She never drank before or during games, she said, but off days and, especially, off seasons were another story. "What I have learned in my recovery from alcohol is that secrets are what bring us down," she told us when we spoke to her on the fourth anniversary of her sobriety on March 12, 2020. "Shame is what brings us down and I was living almost these two completely opposite lives. I was living this alcohol life and this professional one and was really successful at it. And the two weren't, obviously, working together, and it made me feel like a little bit of a fraud."

For the first 12 years of her National Team career, Abby said she never felt the need for a true "coming out" moment. Confirmation of what most people assumed came on Oct. 9, 2013, with a modest social media announcement four days after her Hawaiian wedding to fellow National Teamer Sarah Huffman.

Two years later, progressive columnists

gushed about the social progress when international television cameras followed Abby all the way to the sideline after America's 2015 World Cup victory when she kissed her wife in celebration — nor was it lost on Briana Scurry that the cameras had abruptly cut away 16 years earlier when Bri was similarly headed for a World Cup sideline lip-lock with her girlfriend at the time. "I guess America just wasn't ready to show two girls kissing back then," said Briana. "But Abby made me sit up straight in my chair."

By the time she retired from the game, Abby didn't want to leave any gray area whatsoever about the intentions of her future actions. "For so many years I never wanted to be this person who put myself on a mountain and screamed from the mountain tops about my sexuality because it didn't matter to the way that I played the game, but it does matter to who I am as a person," she told a National Press Club audience in October of 2015. She was ready to speak out on behalf of the Melinas of the world who "may not feel comfortable in their own skin. I want to advocate for them, because if they don't feel comfortable, I will be the person to tell them 'You are loved and you are heard.'" Divorced in 2016, Abby is now remarried to author Glennon Doyle, whose 2020 best-selling confessional, titled



Abby Wambach, at the National Press Club in 2015

“Untamed,” details how the two women met and soon formed a modern soccer family with Glennon’s three children and ex-husband.

When they’re not on the road promoting their books, or elevating myriad social causes from Black Lives Matter to gender equality, Abby and Glennon post near daily Tweets and Instagram stories about the most mundane details of their lives . . . from taking out the trash, to picking up the groceries, to Glennon sneaking into the refrigerator to steal a slurp from Abby’s favorite smoothie. If all those scenarios seem normal, that’s the point. “I’m living in my truth and what I call, in my sobriety, my peace,” said Abby. “It’s not an easy venture and it’s not an easy task, but if you feel on the inside what you say on the outside, that’s the key to all the success in the world.”

“GO GAYS!” EXCLAIMED A NOW CONSPICUOUS Megan Rapinoe in the middle of battling the President and winning a World Cup in the summer of 2019. “You can’t win a championship without gays on your team — it’s never been done before, ever.” More than just another one of Megan’s provocative sound bites that resonated around the world, the statement is also true. We confirmed in our interviews that the United States has

never fielded a National Team roster without multiple lesbian players, dating back to 1985 when, among others, goalies Kim Wyant and Ruth Harker were out to their teammates, but still hiding that fact from most of the outside world. The same was true in 1999, when Briana and fellow goalie Saskia Webber, among others, were lesbian members of Mia Hamm’s team that won the hearts and minds of America in the Rose Bowl. Science does definitively state that elite female athletes are somewhat more likely to straddle the gender line, with higher levels of testosterone, and therefore more muscle mass and capacity for strength and speed. The best athletes are also more likely to display variable gender expression and/or sexual orientation. Said another way: The further a girl progresses in soccer, or any other sport for that matter, the more likely she — and her family — will have to confront sexuality and gender issues that still run counter to certain cultural and religious acceptance thresholds.

“It didn’t take much to look around the locker room and say, ‘I get it. You’re gay. You’re gay. And you’re gay.’ But obviously people didn’t feel comfortable sharing it back then,” said Stacey Enos, a member of the 1985 squad who holds the distinction of being one of the first two of more than 60 National Teamers to have played at the University of North Carolina. “I’m going to be frank: That’s one reason I had a hard time sometimes going to certain events where you didn’t feel like you



COURTESY OF SASKIA WEBBER

Saskia Webber, in 2000 and 2019

Sometimes the Issues Aren't Easy to Understand

FOR THE TWO SEASONS WE SERVED as host family for Havana Solaun when she played for the Washington Spirit in 2017-18, we warmly shared the highs (starting lineups and game-winning goals!), the lows (frustrating injuries, curious coaching decisions) and the mundane: Havana likes eggs, cheese, spinach and sausage — every single day — for breakfast. We loved her instantly. I was selfishly eager to learn all I could about the game from my new soccer daughter so I could pass it on to my youngest daughter, Angie, who mostly lived in breathless awe of having a professional player in the house. Havana patiently answered questions about the importance of nutrition, fitness and keeping my zealotry in check. She also talked openly with my wife about cute men, and women, and the two of them spent more than a few mornings bantering in excited whispers whenever teammates caught Havana's eye.

I never considered any of that my business back then, but I asked her if she'd be willing to share her perspective on sexual orientation and gender expression for this book. Perhaps, I said, it could help a young girl, or boy, gain better understanding of the choices some will inevitably face. "When I was in middle school, there were probably two girls that were on the masculine side of the spectrum," she began. "It just seems that the further along I got in soccer, the more prevalent the masculine woman became. Now, I kind of have my own theories that I've discussed over and over with teammates. Right now, for example, we are in the middle of a major women's equality and empowerment movement and society is teaching young girls that you don't need a man to feel pretty or to be strong."

Some people are most definitely born with their preferences pre-determined and fixed; others are more fluid. The transient soccer lifestyle, Havana said, complicates the issue of nature vs. nurture. "It is just easier to date your teammates than it is males, because you might live in a different country every six months, so how can you commit to a significant other if he's not doing what I'm doing? After soccer, that can change for some people. In college, I personally dated two females that have since married males; I think that's common."

In her late 20s, Havana told me she accepts that she's a masculine female, but really doesn't fully identify with either gender. She has gay members in her family, but admits the whole issue isn't easy to understand, especially for her mother. Havana's advice for children and parents mirrors her own coming out experience. "Parents want to help, to give you the answer, to fix a problem," she said. "They want to say, 'Honey, this is what you do.' But in this situation, you don't need their help; you need their understanding. You need them to listen. I remember my Mom said to me, 'Well, it's just very confusing for me.' I said, 'Cool, Mom, because it is for me, too.'" — P.T.



COURTESY OF HAVANA SOLAUN

Havana Solaun, with her mother, Sandra

could be yourself and not get judged for it. Nobody wants to be judged.”

Dr. Janis Sanchez-Hucles, a renowned psychologist, empathizes with parents who have a hard time confronting the issue in their own children. “I’m the kind of person who does not like to be surprised,” she said. “I like to be able to see things before they happen, or be prepared.” When her daughter, Angela, came out to her before joining the National Team in 2002, Janis admits to being confused. “The important thing is to listen and to be accepting of what they say,” said Janis, who noted that her daughter dated boys throughout high school. “When your children are opening up like this, I don’t think that that’s the time for the parent to do a lot of talking no matter what a child has to say. Your child wants



COURTESY OF ANGELA HUCLES

to be accepted and loved for who they are.” Her biggest fear was, and still is, what mother and daughter call “the triple threat” of oppression, based on race, sexual orientation and gender. “I’m black, gay and a woman,” said Angela. “I know my mother was afraid for me and, to be honest, I have been afraid for myself. I feel very out now, but I still find myself in certain environments and situations where I’m checking for safety — and I don’t know if that will ever go away in my lifetime.”

One thing Angela knows for sure, however, is that having Briana Scurry and Abby Wambach and other gay National Teamers of that era made her feel

Angela Hucles, with her mother, Janis, circa 1981

like she was never alone, and everyone else inside the locker room always made her feel like hers or anyone’s sexual orientation never mattered. She still laughs at the thoughtfulness, yet irony, of Mia Hamm’s gift welcoming her to the team: a T-shirt stating “Boy Crazy” on the front. “Later on Mia said, ‘Oh my gosh, Angie, I’m so sorry, I didn’t know! Why didn’t you say anything?’ I just thought it was cool that Mia Hamm bought me a shirt.”

IT WAS, FOR MANY YEARS, considered a form of professional suicide for women in sports to come out publicly as gay. Tennis champion Martina Navratilova never earned anywhere near the endorsement dollars of Chris Evert despite winning more tournaments, and Billie Jean King, outed against her will as a part of a palimony lawsuit with a woman in 1981, lost nearly all of her sponsors when the truth of her sexual orientation leaked. After the 1999 World Cup, it was Saskia Webber who became the first female soccer player to throw caution to the wind as soon as she retired. Her agency, Wilhelmina Models, wasn’t happy when Saskia revealed herself to be gay in a 2000 *New York Times* article, but the reveal did earn

her an invitation from Al Gore's campaign manager to hit the trail on behalf of the Don't-Ask-Don't-Tell policy on homosexuality in the military — which she promptly declined on principle. "I thought that was a bullshit policy, so I said, 'No!'" With her sports, modeling and political careers all ending at once, her life was turned upside down by the loss of one identity and the revelation of another. "I went through an incredible time of post-World Cup stresses. I was incredibly depressed," said Saskia. "I was drinking way too much and just lost my way. Once those lights go out, once that ball goes flat, life goes from total Beatlemania to zero. And how do you deal with that?"

It was about that same time when Ella Masar was asking some difficult questions of her own. Then a walk-on player at the

University of Illinois, she had developed strongly religious views after a childhood with a bipolar mother, an alcoholic father, and the heavy influence of a homophobic boyfriend. She publicly crusaded against homosexuality for nearly a decade, even as romantic feelings grew stronger toward a female friend. "I literally spent an hour in the shower trying to wash myself clean," said Ella, who was still dating men by the time she started earning call-ups to the National Team. In 2009, at a party in Chicago where she played professionally for the Red Stars, Megan Rapinoe asked her when she was going to come out of the closet. "What are you talking about, Meg? You're so full of it," Ella replied. But by the time Megan and their National Team teammate Lori Lindsey revealed their own orientation to the public in 2012, Ella would soon be joining them in her own unabashed campaign — in hopes that she can help other young girls avoid the same shame she endured. "I've lived this life of feeling dirty for being with a woman and I've lived a life where I can, 110 percent, not deny what I feel for a woman. I deserve to be loved like everybody else," said Ella, who



Babett Peter, left, with her spouse, Ella Masar

COURTESY OF ELLA MASAR

WORDS MATTER

THOUGHTFUL INTERACTIONS BETWEEN coaches, parents and teammates are essential to making all players on a team feel comfortable, regardless of sexual orientation. “Having coaches and other role models using the proper terminology and language with young people is so key,” said **Lilli Barrett-O’Keefe**, a two-year starter at Pomona-Pitzer college and founder of the Play Proud soccer program. “Having a coach saying, ‘Hey, you’re welcome to bring your boyfriend, or your girlfriend, to the team barbecue,’ or having a coach ask about everyone’s pronouns before practices goes such a long way. I think that’s exactly what the National Team does by example.” Here are other considerations from professional players:

OVERCOME BIASES — “I don’t like any judgment of anyone,” said **Briana Scurry** (USWNT 1994-2008). “I’m an African American lesbian. Being gay in the African American community is not well received. I have real issues with African Americans who have a problem with gay people. I say, ‘Really? How in the world can you, as an African American person who’s been basically persecuted under the feet of the man for centuries, say anything to anyone when you know how I feel? How dare you persecute gay people when you didn’t like it when it was being done to you?’”

DON’T ASSUME — “I get comments all the time,” said Army 1st Lieutenant **CoCo Goodson** (NWSL 2012-2015). “I’m not gay, but I have so many friends and family members who are. People just assume, because I joined the military and I played soccer, that I am gay. It just shows you right away what kind of people you want to be around and how ignorant people can be.”

GET TO KNOW THE PERSON — “A lot of people at my church back in Birmingham, where they’re not around a whole lot of outwardly gay people, just assume that every gay person is like the stereotype they’ve put in their mind,” said **Cat Whitehill** (USWNT 2000-2010). “I’ll ask them, ‘Do you know anyone that is actually gay? And do you love them?’ Some Christian people are hiding behind this weird ideal of what they think is right.”

WELCOME COMMUNICATION — “My daughter was telling me about a speaker who had come to her school from the local LGBTQ community,” said **Kim Wyant** (USWNT 1985-1993) “She told her classmates that she could speak personally about it because her parents are lesbian. She talked to me about some of the stereotyping and how that’s being shattered in society. And I just thought to myself, ‘Well, that’s great. When I was a kid, we didn’t talk about things like this.’”

CELEBRATE DIFFERENCES — “Seek out diversity on a global scale, not just in what you do, but in who you work with, who you spend time around,” said **Whitney Engen** (USWNT 2011-2016). “I’ve watched some really cool relationships blossom between my friends who I never would have thought would be together. Try to just see people be comfortable in who they are, and own it, and get to be the best version of themselves. I think that that’s something really special and I’m really grateful that I was part of the women’s soccer world, one of the earlier arenas for women to come out and be comfortable.”

SUPPORT UNCONDITIONALLY — “The game has definitely taught me this, that you’re going to be around all kinds of people and you just have to love them for who they are,” said **Mallory Pugh** (USWNT 2016-present). “They are your teammates and you support them no matter what.”

played professionally in Europe for many years until retiring in 2019. She delivered her first child in 2020 with her wife, German soccer star Babett Peter. “I’ve had a lot of young women write me and say, ‘Thank you for doing this because my family doesn’t support me. I’m gay. I’m homeless. I have thoughts of suicide. You inspired me that I know it will be OK one day.’”

For Melina de la Cruz Gonzalez, that same kind of inspiration, fueled by soccer, might have saved her life. On that Saturday when she showed up staggeringly drunk at 6 in the evening, her coach and program director, Lilli Barrett-O’Keefe, opted not to send her away from Saturday Night Lights for good. In her sober moments, Melina was becoming a respected young leader of the program, so Lilli brought Melina home that night and then made it a point to have a blunt conversation with her when the alcohol had worn off. “Traditionally, a club would obviously just suspend that player and kick them out of the program, but I saw something much deeper had to be going on,” said Lilli. “When we sat down, she told me she was gay and was growing up in a very religious and conservative family.”

For Lilli, the conversation hit home. Once an aspiring National Teamer herself, who played in the Olympic Development Program in Illinois and attended Anson

Dorrance’s summer soccer camps at the University of North Carolina, she had become disillusioned with a competitive soccer culture that she felt rejected her sexual orientation as a teenager. The one player on her youth team who had revealed herself to be a lesbian, according to Lilli, was treated like a pariah by her teammates. “The whole time the narrative around her was that she was sort of creepy and people didn’t want to share a room with her, and she didn’t really have a lot of friends,” said Lilli. “She was none of those things; she was lovely. She just happened to be a lesbian.”

Drawn to Pomona-Pitzer College’s social justice programs, Lilli did play two years as a forward on the women’s soccer team — but she became far more interested in her research grant to study the social impact of the National Team. Growing up, she said it was difficult for her to relate to the girl-next-door, conservative image of the 1999 World Cup team; the teams thereafter, however, presented what she saw as a revolutionary level of openness. “When you see Abby Wambach, or Megan Rapinoe, or a Lori Lindsey or a Joanna Lohman and their energy and commitment to inclusion, it becomes a transformational experience,” said Lilli, whose other research grant work led her to create educational



COURTESY OF NEW YORK CITY FOOTBALL CLUB/PLAY PROUD

Melina de la Cruz Gonzalez, far right, with National Teamer Lori Lindsey, Lilli Barrett-O’Keefe, Melina’s mother, Maria, and Ethan Zohn, the co-founder of Grassroot Soccer

programs in Kenya and Saturday Night Lights, in her global work as North America’s director of StreetFootballWorld.org, a global non-profit that uses soccer, aka football, as a universal language.

OPEN COMMUNICATION, IN THE END, is what led Lilli to invite Melina’s mother, Maria, to the East 115th Street middle school gym on a Saturday night for an intervention of sorts. With girls of all ages kicking soccer balls just outside the door, Melina and Maria sat across the table from each other with Lilli in the middle. Everyone’s faces were already reddened when Melina blurted out three words: “Mom, I’m gay.” Tears came like a flood. “I

love you no matter what,” said Maria, who hugged her daughter as if she’d found her again for the first time in years. “It’s safe to say that Melina had never cried like that in her life,” said Lilli. “Melina, she’s fucking tough like so many of the girls that I work with in East Harlem. You don’t crack them. But her mother had literally the textbook perfect reaction: ‘I just want you to be happy, and I want you to be safe.’”

The transformation in Melina’s life, she said, was like flicking a switch. She left the gang, quit drinking and returned to school regularly from that moment forward. She ultimately made it through high school as an honors student and began attending a local community college.



COURTESY OF MELINA DE LA CRUZ GONZALEZ

Melina de la Cruz Gonzalez, front, with her friends from Saturday Night Lights at a 2015 World Cup celebration with Alex Morgan

In 2015, she even rode as a guest on a float in a tickertape parade through the streets of Manhattan. Melina’s National Team heroes had just won a World Cup and Lilli had an inside connection. “They are all such great role models for me, for my friends, and for the LGBTQ community,” said Melina. “If they are able to be out and proud, it’s more reassuring for us younger kids or people who have not come out yet.”

Lilli has since moved on from Saturday Night Lights on a weekly basis, leaving the program in the good hands of Melina de la Cruz Gonzalez and a host of other homegrown leaders doing good things for their community through soccer. Lilli now focuses on StreetFootballWorld, Common Goal and other initiatives such as Play Proud, which endeavor to make the game accessible for everyone. Any little thing, from a public post, to a private kiss that happens to be shown on camera, opens the door another crack. “Even if you’re not super outspoken like Megan Rapinoe, even if you’re not on the first team, but you bring partners to games or kiss your partners after goals, it matters. When you post anniversary pictures on social media to just sort of normalize this, it helps. Parents, and coaches in levels from youth all the way up to the National Team, are all part of the solution.” 🇺🇸

Uncomfortable Conversations

The National Team Finally Appears to be on the Right Track Toward Leveling the Playing Field for Everyone

“**Y**OU GET TO THAT BUS STOP FIRST!” Ernest Scurry Jr. told his children in Huntsville, Texas, until a tropical storm literally washed away his home. “Always be first,” he said when he sent his older children off to school in Minneapolis, Minn., where he had moved his family in search of a better life. Even when that home, built over a landfill, began to literally sink into the earth, Ernest never wavered in his message. After those two devastating setbacks, the Scurry family moved to Dayton, a small farming town 15 miles north of Minneapolis, where the youngest of eight children took her father’s advice to heart. Morning after morning, Briana Scurry always stood out for being first in line at the bus stop. One morning in 1980 when Briana was 9, a boy took exception to her elevated standing and tried to take her place in line. “Get out of the way, blackie,” he said.

Ernest and his wife, Robbie, were calm when Briana recounted the story later that evening at the dinner table. Perhaps, her siblings suggested, Briana could invoke some of the karate from the lessons she’d been taking ever since a girl pushed her down in the schoolyard two years earlier. Ernest rejected the idea. Karate teaches us to defend, not to fight, said the veteran of the Korean War. He knew that, as the only black child in the school, Briana would likely be inviting conflict daily if she were to pick a fight of her own. But an older daughter, Daphne, had other ideas. When she accompanied her littlest sibling to the bus stop the next morning, Daphne approached the racist boy and gripped





Briana Scurry, making her legendary penalty kick save against China in the 1999 World Cup at the Rose Bowl

his forearm so firmly with her fingernails that he's probably been bearing the scar for life. "My sister said, 'I know how to end this right here,'" said Briana, the only African-American woman inducted into the National Soccer Hall of Fame as of 2020. As with most things in her life now, she laughs easily and disarmingly in the telling of the 40-year-old story. She understands, however, that nothing about it has ever truly been funny. "Do I necessarily think that was the best way to handle it? Well, she had to speak to him in a language that he understood."

The issues of racial inequality and flat-out racism in soccer have, until recently, been the most difficult to put into words. In terms of representation, the National Team has fared much better in some areas than most people realize. From 1985-2020, about 12.5 percent of the players all-time, 30 of 241, have been of African-American descent (see Page 40), and black players have been on the field about 13 percent of the time, which is equal to the roughly 13 percent black population in America. On the other hand, only a small number of Hispanic players have ever been selected to the National Team, and even fewer Asians have ever made it — though that may be changing. Many of the best U.S. youth national teams of recent years have an even higher percentage of black, Asian and Latino players — and 23 percent of the players on the 2019 National Team World Cup roster were black — which could paint a brighter picture of inclusion and acceptance. But then there are the subtleties. Entire youth suburban soccer leagues often have little to no ethnic diversity, and certain members of the populous are still woefully ignorant. At a women's professional game in Utah, with the U.S. Women's National Team still basking

PA IMAGES/JON BUCKLE/ALAMY STOCK IMAGE

Silence Wasn't Working

In the wake of the murder of George Floyd in May of 2020, the world seemed to pause for a period of racial awakening. Here are just a few perspectives from National Teamers as shared with us, or on their social media posts:

Michelle Akers (USWNT 1985-2000):

“I gotta admit when (Megan) Rapinoe first kneeled, I believed staging a protest during the national anthem was disrespectful to the flag, our country, and those who protect our freedoms with their lives. Especially as a USA player. Today I feel differently. The anthem and flag do deserve respect, but so does each and every American citizen. Our country has a history of proclaiming specific rights for all and selectively applying them to a few. To protest (respectfully) for rights that aren't happening equally for all is what needs to be done.”

Rose Lavelle (USWNT 2017-present):

“I realize my silence has not contributed to addressing these issues and, therefore, I am part of the problem of racism and inequality. Because, to spark change, we need everyone to do their part, speak up and demand better. I was not doing my part and I must own up to that.”

Linda Gancitano (USWNT 1985):

“This racism and social justice discussion is part of equality. I think it's all the same conversation. I think treating every individual equally and with respect and kindness is the new consciousness — what the world is asking for.”

Alex Morgan (2010-present):

“When will all Americans be treated and respected equally regardless of race and gender? We are yearning for true leadership and inclusivity from the top.”

Midge Purce (USWNT 2019-present):

“Have I experienced overt racism? Yes. I was raised by my black father with my black brother,



Jo with Rose Lavelle in 2018

so overt racism has been prevalent in mine and my family's experiences. But I think it's crucial to understand that open hate isn't the only way that racism manifests itself. Racism is complex, and it can be very nuanced. It allows you to like my Dad, and think he's a great guy, while simultaneously supporting, perpetuating and being indifferent toward systems and culture strategically designed to oppress him. Make no mistake, that's still racism.”

Lynn Williams (USWNT 2016-present):

“The goal is not to say, ‘I don't see color.’ That's not the goal. The goal is for everybody to say, ‘I see you, I accept you, we're equal.’ That goes for all races, ethnicities, genders, sexuality, that's what the goal is. If someone ever said to me that they don't see color, then I would say, ‘You don't see me.’ Because this is who I am, I just want you to accept me.”

in the afterglow of the World Cup victory, an appalling fan remark directed toward goalie Adrianna Franch led her to offer this public Tweet on Sept. 8, 2019:

“The situation surrounding our game Friday night is not a NEW issue, nor is it a first for me. RACISM is NOT okay in any form!! We as a HUMAN RACE can be better and should be better. We as a SPORT can help show the way.”

TO REVEAL THE PRESENT AND FUTURE of racial issues in soccer, the evolution of the game may be best understood by focusing for a moment on the past. In the year that began with Ronald Reagan’s second inauguration, and the release of the music video “We are the World,” featuring Michael Jackson, Tina Turner, Lionel Richie and Diana Ross singing in harmony with other musical icons of the day to benefit famine relief in Africa, the United States Soccer Federation was invited to send a team to the Mundialito. Translated in Spanish to mean “Little World Cup,” the four-team tournament would be lost among most



lists of key events of 1985, but the invitation would lead to the first actual physical assemblage of the National Team that had existed only on paper since 1982. Sixteen American women would travel to a beach town known as Jesolo in Italy in August of 1985 to lose three games and tie one.

As 1985 progressed, “Back to the Future” would become the dominant film, Nintendo would be the preeminent game, and Windows 1.0 would begin to set the stage for computers’ grip on our lifestyle. In the age prior to social media, however, an event in Philadelphia is notable today, if only because it was so unnoticed back then. A radical black environmental group known as MOVE, short for the Movement, had been sparring with city officials since 1972 about everything from caging animals at the local zoo, to clean air and water policies, to police brutality. When it all came to a standoff between police and residents, the local Philadelphia government made the unconscionable decision to drop explosives on a residential home with 13 black American citizens inside. When the fire from the bomb began to spread to nearby homes, the police commissioner, a white man named Gregore Sambor, ordered the fire department to stand and watch while more than 60 other houses — an entire predominantly black neighborhood — burned and left more than 250 homeless. Eleven people, including five children, were killed and yet white America never seemed to care. The only person ever arrested was a black woman who survived the bombing by hiding in the basement.

STILL ANOTHER NOTEWORTHY EVENT OCCURRED IN 1985. On July 5 — just six weeks prior to that first ever National Team game — baby Megan Anna Rapinoe was born to her parents Denise and Jim, 11 minutes after her fraternal twin Rachael got out of the way. The twins’ grandfather would nickname Rachael “Muffin,” while cheekily describing little Megan as “Ma Barker,” in deference to the notorious mother of an outlaw gangster family from the Roaring Twenties. In the midst of a seven-child family, Megan said she always



Megan Rapinoe, next to Meghan Klingenberg, kneeling in support of Colin Kaepernick in 2016

fought unusually hard to have her voice heard at the modest dinner table in Redding, Calif., where crime became anything other than a laughing matter. Older brother Brian, the twins' hero and first backyard soccer coach, always seemed to be in trouble. On one memorable day when the twins' soccer exploits were being celebrated on the sports page, Brian would be profiled on the front page for drug-related offenses that would send him off to jail for much of the next two decades.

For a while, Megan felt as if she'd lost Brian for good. As he described in a 2019 interview with *ESPN* magazine, he had initially aligned himself in prison with a white supremacist gang as a way to survive the prison culture and maintain his drug habit. After years of solitary confinement, however, Brian emerged with a new perspective that he shared with his little sister in texts and letters: "You start relating to people beyond your hood, your area, your color. It doesn't take long before you start talking with each other, seeing how much you have in common. Back there, it's just you in the cell, and the man next to you is just a man himself." When Megan infamously became the first white American athlete to take a knee in support of black NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick's stance on police brutality and racial injustice in 2016 — she stated to the media: "Being a gay American, I know what it means to look at the flag and not have it protect all of your liberties." That made Brian even more proud of Megan than winning World Cups in 2015 and 2019.

BRENT CLARK/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

“I have so much respect for her. And not just because she’s the shit at soccer,” he said. “It’s her utter conviction in the things that she believes in and the stances she takes against injustices in the world.”

Speaking out and up has always been, according to Stephanie Lopez Cox, just a case of Megan being Megan. Stephanie, the first player of Hispanic heritage to play a significant



COURTESY OF RUTH HARKER

Ruth Harker, left, with fellow National Teamers Thori Staples Bryan, Staci Wilson and Crystal Dunn

role on the National Team, has known her ever since Megan and Rachael showed up as teenagers at their first Elk Grove United club team practice in California, with Megan already yelling at her twin. Stephanie won an NCAA national championship with the Rapinoes at the University of Portland in 2005 and would beat Megan to the National Team by a year. “She used to use that voice on her sister when we were younger; she was always on Rachael about something,” said Stephanie. “But it’s been so gratifying all these years later to see how she is using it for the greater good.”

While, U.S. Soccer never blinked when Megan came out as gay in 2012, it took a zero-tolerance attitude toward Megan kneeling during a National Team match against Thailand in Columbus, Ohio, in 2016. Just as Colin Kaepernick was banned from the NFL, she was soon thereafter left off National Team rosters; Rapinoe SC, an apparel and training company that she co-founded with Rachael, lost sales. U.S. Soccer eventually skirted the issue by passing what was informally known as the “Rapinoe rule” that made it illegal to kneel during the anthem — and she was allowed to rejoin the team in time for the 2019 World Cup that would send her profile, and political platform, into the stratosphere. She became the tournament’s leading scorer and most valuable player, all the while functioning as what she calls a “walking protest” in favor of equal pay and gender equality, as well as gay rights and racial fairness.

FOR CRYSTAL DUNN, IT WAS MEGAN TAKING A KNEE, and their private conversations beforehand, that will always stand front and center when she thinks of her teammate. Crystal told us she had never experienced any gross or obvious instances of racial discrimination growing up in Rockville Center on Long Island in New York. Though she was one of the few black students, and often the only black player on her soccer teams, she said her athletic prowess created a safe bubble. Teachers and principals, she said, always had her back. Yet she knew the horror stories of racism, and felt the stereotypes manifest themselves

Fixing Racism Begins at Home

STACI WILSON, ACCORDING TO HER COLLEGE COACH, Anson Dorrance, is one of the few players he ever recruited in 40 years who could “change the temperature” of the game simply by being involved. To this day, he calls her “Buzzsaw” for the way she, at all of about 5 feet tall, took down opponents. I hit it off with her instantly when we met for the first time in October of 2018 on a State Department trip to Niger in Africa. We were surrounded by military personnel and guns the entire time. Truckloads of them. In Agadez, the gateway to the Sahara, we were assigned our own bodyguard, who slept in the next room. I was still playing, so Staci, a 1996 Olympic gold medalist turned strength and speed coach, trained me through 100-degree morning workouts. Then we’d work 15-hour days teaching children, sleep in weird places, and do it all again the next year in Nigeria. After those experiences together in Africa, I couldn’t think of too many people I admired more.

So when Staci called me in January of 2020, I answered on the first ring. “Jo, I want you to be a panelist,” said Staci, the first black female player at North Carolina. “And you’re going to be the only white panelist.” The occasion was the United Soccer Coaches Association’s annual convention held in Baltimore,

in other words a white event in a black city, where Staci would be moderating a panel discussion titled: “Inclusion Without Power: Black Soccer in America.” I was nervous when the event began, so I listened. Lincoln Phillips, the first black professional coach in the United States, told the story of leading the Howard University men’s soccer team to the 1971 NCAA Division I



COURTESY OF STACI WILSON

Joanna, with Andre Fortune, Lincoln Phillips, Lenny Taylor and National Teamers Staci Wilson and Thori Staples Bryan in 2020

championship, making Howard the first historically black college to win the title — only to have it stripped for bogus player-eligibility violations based in vile racism. I listened as a black coach in the audience recalled a game where the other team, white players from an upper middle-class neighborhood, refused to play against his mostly black team. I listened to stories of black players being called racial slurs and left off teams because of the “pay-to-play” system.

I realized I was no longer nervous. I was angry, ashamed, and hotter on the inside than that African heat made me on the outside. I knew in my heart that the individuals responsible for creating this injustice shared the same skin color as me and I thought of taking the microphone. Just then, though, I realized the most powerful thing I could do in that moment, as the only white panelist and among the few white people in the room, was just to listen and learn. To be present. When I finally did speak, it was brief, heartfelt, and with humility. I’ll continue to go to Africa with Staci Wilson or anyone else who wants to come; it’s important work. But I left Baltimore that day with another vow: to help fix what we need to right here in our own country. — J.L.

INSPIRATION: RACE

THE PIONEERS

To honor the achievement of overcoming barriers both real and perceived, we list the 30 National Teamers of known African heritage here, along with the date of their first appearance and career appearances (through the end of 2020):*

Sandi Gordon – July 9, 1987	7
Saskia Webber – Aug. 14, 1992.....	28
Thori Staples Bryan – March 11, 1993	65
Briana Scurry – March 16, 1994	175
Staci Wilson – Jan. 23, 1995.....	15
Tammy Pearman – Aug. 6, 1995.....	9
Danielle Slaton – Feb. 24, 1999.....	43
LaKeysia Beene – Jan. 7, 2000	18
Nandi Pryce – Jan. 7, 2000.....	8
Keisha Bell – March 11, 2001.....	2
Angela Hucles – April 27, 2002.....	109
Shannon Boxx – Sept. 1, 2003.....	195
Lindsey Huie – March 11, 2005.....	1
Tina Ellertson – July 10, 2005.....	34
India Trotter – Jan. 18, 2006.....	2
Daneshia Adams – Oct. 1, 2006.....	1
Sydney Leroux – Jan. 21, 2011	77
Christen Press – Feb. 9, 2013	139
Crystal Dunn – Feb. 13, 2013	105
Jaelene Daniels – Oct. 21, 2015	8
Mallory Pugh – Jan. 23, 2016	63
Casey Short – Oct. 19, 2016	32
Lynn Williams – Oct. 19, 2016.....	29
Jessica McDonald – Nov. 10, 2016	19
Taylor Smith – July 27, 2017	10
Tegan McGrady – April 6, 2018.....	1
Adrianna Franch – March 2, 2019.....	4
Midge Purce – Nov. 10, 2019.....	2
Alana Cook – Nov. 10, 2019.....	1
Sophia Smith – Nov. 27, 2020	1

NOTE: Kim Crabbe made the 1986 roster, but did not appear in a game

**bold denotes still actively playing*

even in her most successful moments at the University of North Carolina and later the National Team. In the wake of the murder of George Floyd in May of 2020, she decided to step out herself and tell the world that words matter.

“My whole life people have been describing me as, ‘You’re athletic. You’re fast. You’re powerful,’” she told us. “It’s true, I can be all those things, but I’m not just a body. I’m so much more than that. I think that black people are viewed by society as a threat for those same traits that the sports announcers talk about: ‘Aggressive. Strong.’ That’s why we get the cops called on us, for no reason, just walking down the street. It threatens people for some strange reason.” As the national narrative spawned a moment for racial inflection in the summer of 2020, Crystal called out her teammate publicly for the moment Megan had once again transcended her sport — this time in an even more powerful way than when Megan publicly revealed herself as a lesbian.

“She came up to me and said, Crys, ‘I’m thinking of kneeling.’ And I remember being filled with so much joy for her wanting to fight the cause,” said Crystal during an open roundtable about racism broadcast by the *Bleacher Report* on June 17, 2020. “But at that time, I said, ‘You have nothing to do with this.’ Crystal said Megan made her understand that when racism is inflicted on one person, the inherent malaise impacts everyone around them. Crystal did not, however, feel she could join Megan with her knee on the turf during the anthem back in 2016. “I remember telling Megan, ‘I have to stand, dude, because I don’t know what’s going to happen. I’m scared for

my job. I’m scared that it’s going to look differently if a black girl on the team kneels.’ I just remember having really hard conversations with her about how I was internally conflicted.



COURTESY OF RUTH HARKER

National Team goalies through the years: Briana Scurry, left, with Siri Mullinix, Kim Wyant, Alyssa Naehler, Adrianna Franch, Ruth Harker, Jen Mead, Amy Allmann Griffin, Mary Harvey and Tracy Noonan Ducar

Then I saw the way that U.S. Soccer responded and treated Megan. They kept her out of some games, kept her out of camps, and I thought, ‘Yes, that was bad, but they could rip up my contract.’ I thought I actually was going to probably get it worse.”

By the time Crystal played her next game after making those comments, at the Challenge Cup presented by the National Women’s Soccer League in late June and July of 2020, the majority of the women’s professional players were kneeling during the anthem; even the ones who stood were wearing Black Lives Matter T-shirts over their uniform jerseys. Two weeks earlier — with societal upheaval reaching a profound, almost breakneck pace nationally with the wake of George Floyd’s death — U.S. Soccer, led by its new president, the former National Teamer Cindy Parlow Cone, had voted swiftly to rescind the Rapinoe rule. Cindy, among the most competitive people ever to represent our country on a soccer field with 75 goals in 158 games, admitted she had been wrong to chastise Megan Rapinoe in the first place. “Megan and I have had several conversations about this topic, and about what else she has done,” Cindy told us. “I know that it wasn’t easy for her to do — because she was ahead of the curve from the rest of us, including myself. And so I apologized to her for the policy about standing for the flag. I thanked her for being a leader. It took most of the country several more years to catch up to where she already was.”

THAT LEVEL OF HONEST INTROSPECTION gives many people around the game hope for significant changes on many fronts. As U.S. Soccer’s first female leader, now charged with leveling the playing field once and for all with regard to gender and race, Cindy has been a part of the sisterhood that’s been fighting for social change for decades. She first hopes to settle years of acrimony about equal pay, and then work together with National Teamers past, present and future to demonstrate the game welcomes everyone regardless of race or socioeconomic status. “Right now, there are a lot of organizations that are doing great work in this space, but it needs to be bigger,” she said. “And we need to figure out



COURTESY OF ANGELA HUCLES

Briana Scurry, with Angela Hucles and Danielle Slaton in 2019

how to incorporate the inner-city kids, or lower socioeconomic kids, into our landscape so they feel like this sport is for them — that club soccer or the rec league is open for them — regardless of geography, economics, or skin color.”

As of 2020, 30 women of African descent had played at least one game with the National Team and their stories are poignant. Danesha Adams recalled being called the N-word on a youth field, and Thori Staples Bryan said she’s been called that vile descriptor all her life. “That’s just a fact of life in America when you’re black; it still happens today,” said Thori, who runs a youth soccer camp in North Carolina that attempts to empower young girls. The stories can be haunting. Staci Wilson is considered one of the greatest players in the vaunted history of University of North Carolina soccer, but believes the color of her skin limited her opportunities on the National Team. “I know I can’t ever prove it, because no one tells you the truth,” she said. “But it’s a feeling I’ve had to live with all my life.” Briana Scurry, who was writing a book, titled “My Greatest Save,” just as we researched this one, said she is certain racism was in play during her career — even if people weren’t calling her names to her face. She learned that no matter how hard she tried to be first and best, following the lessons her father taught her, that effort wouldn’t always pay equal dividends. “I thought for the longest time that the reason why I seemed to be undermarketed and underacknowledged or not praised up was because I was a goalkeeper,” she said. “And then Hope Solo came along and I realized it wasn’t at all about being a goalie. They ignored me because of the color of my skin.”

For National Teamers who are already mothers, the prospect of raising black children

in America can be daunting, even from the moment of birth. Danielle Slaton and her white husband, John Albers, celebrated the delivery of their son, John Jr. in early 2020. “I remember thinking, within the hour of him being born, ‘Thank goodness his skin isn’t as dark as mine,’” said Danielle, who played 43 games with the National Team beginning in 1999. “That might keep him safe in a way that I can’t.” She said she empathizes with Jessica McDonald, a member of the 2019 World Cup team, who talks publicly about being on the same field in Utah where Andriana Franch heard the racial slur in 2019. In Jessica’s case, police threatened to arrest her then 7-year-old son Jeremiah when he was trying to get down to the field to be with his mother after a National Team game. “It’s particularly agonizing with black boys,” said Danielle. “What is the time that they go from being cute, to a threat? And it happens in a day. I don’t know what age it is. Age 8? 10? 12? But you look at her son and you see him out on the field throwing confetti with her, this cute, wonderful, amazing boy. And then at what point does society see him differently — as a threat? And why?”

Jessica told us she lives in fear of misunderstandings due to racism. “I am dreading the day, just hoping to find the words, when my son truly realizes he’s



Jessica McDonald, with her son, Jeremiah, at the 2019 World Cup

black,” she said. The moment that has come the closest so far is the same moment that made so many people realize Megan Rapinoe was right to kneel. On May 25, 2020, while Jessica folded laundry one room away, Jeremiah was playing with his toys in the living room with the television on in the background. When she heard the video gone viral of George Floyd begging for his life — “I can’t breathe” — she stepped into the space next to her son. She considered turning off the TV, but stood paralyzed. “I didn’t know what exactly was happening in that moment,” she said. “You see the knee on his neck. Oh, my gosh. You hear those last words, the simple fact that he was yelling for his Mom. And then just like that, he was gone.” Jeremiah turned to his own mother, unsure of what they had just watched together. “Did he just die, Mommy?” he asked. Jessica slumped into a chair. “Yes,” she said. Only days later, she fought back tears as she re-lived the agony of having to comfort her son. “I have to explain things to Jeremiah, in very simple words, because he’s not understanding the magnitude of things in life right now. Just for him to witness



The many faces of Crystal: with her husband, Pierre Soubrier, loud and proud, and powerful

something like that was crushing. It truly was on a different level for me as a mother.”

Jessica, also told us that, as the calls and texts began pouring in from teammates, the incident would prove to be cathartic. The level of openness within the soccer community was like nothing she had ever experienced. “Out of that tragedy came a very beautiful thing, as an African American, to see,” she said. “Everybody is supporting us on this issue now, because it used to only be blacks fighting for blacks. My teammates have been asking a lot of questions and we’ve had a lot of chats with different teammates who are not black. I’ve been hearing a lot of apologies, and I’ve said, ‘I don’t need for you to be sorry. I just need for you to continue to be aware of what’s happening, and continuing to talk about it, because we need this to change.’”

TRUE TO THE COLLECTIVE CULTURE that had been established on the National Team for decades, nearly every current team member spoke out in some manner during the aftermath of May. One of the captains, Becky Sauerbrunn, owned up to the shortcomings of prior dialogue. “I had not been in a lot of conversations when we talk about race with the group,” she told us. “We talk a lot about gender, we talk a lot about LGBTQ issues, but we really haven’t talked about race. Clearly that is an issue and it makes people uncomfortable, but we have to get through that and we need to start having substantial conversations and listening to one another.”

Stepping forward in her own role as a team leader, Crystal Dunn held tightly to the belief that the summer of 2020 brought renewed clarity for an issue buried too long. “We have been getting together for hardcore conversation,” she said. “All the black players shared their experiences, and I think it was so incredible the response that we got



RICK GAWLEY

Mo'ne Davis, in 2018

said Mo'ne Davis, who told us that Christen, a Stanford graduate, is the player she most admires. Mo'ne plays soccer, softball and basketball. But six years earlier, in the summer of 2014, she became a cultural phenomenon in Philly as the girl who pitched a baseball team of inner-city boys to the Little League World Series with a 70-mile-per-hour fastball. In those heady days of breathless ESPN coverage and newspaper headlines, Mo'ne took an American history tour with her team, the Anderson Monarchs, south from Pennsylvania, through Washington, D.C., and into the Carolinas. All the monuments, the visits to museums, made her truly aware of the implications of the color of her own skin for the first time. It made her appreciate it all the more, three years later, when a player from her favorite sports team knelt down and spoke up.

“When you have a female, a white female, kneeling for police brutality and racism, it sticks with you,” said Mo'ne. “So many people aren't going to do that when they know they will be criticized for it. That was really cool to watch. And now you have people looking back on what she did and they're starting to realize, ‘Colin Kaepernick was right. Megan Rapinoe was right. Christen Press is right.’ I knew they were right the whole time, this team. It helps tell me how I want to live my life.” 🇺🇸

from our teammates. I think the meetings have also encouraged people to ask questions — because I don't think race needs to be a difficult discussion. I want people to ask me how I feel and what I'm going through for any challenge that I might face based on my race.” Other players, even the ones who don't typically engage loudly, used their own platforms in their own ways. “We call for an END to systemic racism that allows this culture of corruption to go unchecked and our lives to be taken. See the demands. Sign the petition,” re-Tweeted Christen Press on May 30, 2020.

Those collective words, it was clear, were not going unnoticed by the soccer playing youth of America. Thirty-five years later, it would be impossible to imagine something similar to the MOVE bombing in Philadelphia happening today without a majority of the nation taking the proverbial knee. “When you see your role models out there fighting for what's right, it makes you want to go out and follow the same footsteps in the future,”



Mo'ne Davis, in 2014