

Women's Soccer: More Iron Horse, Less Braying

Recently, Americans were implored to pay attention to a sport most of us do not follow for reasons that have little to do with the dramatic nature of the competition. Turning on a computer brought regular reminders of this sport, with Google Doodles dedicated to each of the participating teams and news feeds filled with stories about the event, most focusing on the team everyone expected to win. When that team won, Americans were told that we needed to celebrate.

I am referring, of course, to the Women's World Cup in soccer, recently won by the American team.

That team was seen by its media cheerleaders as advancing cherished causes such as women's equality, sexual liberation, and internationalism. Those with doubts about the team, any of those causes, or the way the team and its advocates thought those causes should be advanced, were written off as bigoted Deplorables, even though Americans have a long record of embracing female athletes of all kinds who excel in international competition.

But unlike Peggy Fleming or Bonnie Blair or Mary Lou Retton or Katie Ledecky or Florence Griffith Joyner or any number of female Olympians widely embraced by Americans, Megan Rapinoe and her teammates and their fans didn't even pretend that they were representing all Americans. As such, they forfeited the nationalist impulse that glues Americans to their seats every four years to cheer on athletes they had never before heard of playing sports they seldom watch.

Before the American women had won the World Cup, Megan Rapinoe declared that she wasn't going to the "f***ing White House" for a victory celebration, thereby revealing her disdain for

the half of America that supports the current occupant of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue and the women's soccer teams the Americans had yet to play.

Rapinoe's disdain for Trump was soon echoed by teammate Ali Krieger, who [told](#) the media, "I refuse to respect a man that warrants no respect."

When the American women won the championship match, numerous media outlets reported that their fans were chanting "f*** Trump."

It is also widely speculated that Christian athlete Jaelene Hinkle didn't make the women's team, despite her undoubted soccer prowess, because she had voiced skepticism of gay marriage. And the supporters of the women's team think this is entirely appropriate, since "inclusion" apparently requires the exclusion of anyone holding different views. As BuzzFeed reporter Molly Hemsley-Clancy [tweeted](#), "Let's take a second to think how Jaelene Hinkle might have missed out on a winning World Cup [because] she is homophobic."

The American women did not make up for their profanity and political grandstanding by graciousness elsewhere. They ran up the score on the hapless Thai women 13-0 and loudly celebrated even late goals. (As that score suggests, American women dominate women's soccer for the same reason both American and Canadian women dominate women's ice hockey: much of the rest of the world doesn't care very much about their sport.)

When the American women won the championship game, some of them carelessly dropped the American flag on the ground and walked over it before casually picking it up. And when they went to New York City for their victory parade, several of them [spewed profanity in public](#), including one team member who quoted a rapper and exulted, "Hide your kids! Hide your wives! And lock your f***ing doors. Because we've got the key to the mother***ing city and I'm coming for ya'al b****es!"

Rapinoe ended her speech by proclaiming New York City “the mother****ing best.”

As commentator Matt Walsh [noted](#), Rapinoe also lifted the World Cup trophy and a bottle of champagne while declaring “I deserve this. I deserve everything.” (Those who knew that the American women had lost five to two to a team of 14-year-old boys in Dallas in 2017 could be forgiven for wondering if the scale of Rapinoe’s accomplishment justified the extent of her self-satisfaction).

Rapinoe (@mPinoe): “I deserve this!”
pic.twitter.com/gbd0M0zjF1

– Molly Prince (@mollyfprince) [July 10, 2019](#)

As the media kept insisting that I celebrate what Rapinoe and her teammates had achieved, I found myself thinking instead about an athlete one can never imagine saying “I deserve everything,” baseball’s “Iron Horse,” Lou Gehrig. By coincidence, the 80th anniversary of Gehrig’s farewell to baseball on July 4, 1939 occurred when today’s sports writers were busy toasting Rapinoe. A few Gehrig items popped up in my Facebook feed around July 4 and I was soon reading more than I ever had about the self-effacing New Yorker who used his great athletic skill and even greater character to win with dignity and even to inspire, not to draw attention to himself, whine, strike political poses, or unleash profane diatribes.

Gehrig attended Columbia on a football scholarship, but his even greater skill on the baseball diamond drew the attention of the New York Yankees. Gehrig accepted the Yankees’ \$1500 signing bonus because, as he later told *The New York Times*, “a fellow has to eat. At the end of my sophomore year my father was taken ill and we had to have money. ... So when there was no money coming in there was nothing for me to do but sign up.”

The Yankees certainly got their money's worth. Gehrig compiled a lifetime batting average of .340, batting .361 in seven World Series and hitting 493 home runs (including 23 grand slams) and driving in 1,995 runs. Teammate Joe DiMaggio later remembered Gehrig as the finest hitter he ever saw.

Despite his prodigious talent, Gehrig did not chafe at all the attention lavished on his older teammate, Babe Ruth: "I'm not a headline guy. I know that as long as I am following Ruth to the plate I could have stood on my head and no one would have known the difference."

Gehrig also famously played in 2,130 consecutive ball games, a streak made possible by Gehrig's playing through 17 fractures in his hands, several concussions, and serious back pain.

That streak came to an end after Gehrig contracted the degenerative disease that robbed him first of his athletic ability, then of his mobility, and then of his life, all in a little over two years. In his final season, DiMaggio recalled, "He'd lean into me trying to get up. The man had an iron will and, yes, the heart of a lion. He dressed so slowly. He'd get up and go out and try."

When Gehrig concluded that he was no longer helping his team, he ended the streak by benching himself, and the opposing fans witnessing this in Detroit gave a standing ovation to the man whose grit and perseverance had won the admiration of baseball fans everywhere.

That admiration only grew when Gehrig said goodbye to the game he loved. Keith Olbermann [tells](#) that remarkable story as well as anyone.

As Olbermann notes, Gehrig did not want a Lou Gehrig Appreciation Day. Nor did he want to speak. But Gehrig was the consummate team player, and after his manager, Joe McCarthy, had a brief private word with him, Gehrig advanced to the

microphones and gave “a muted, heartbreaking speech” about “gratitude” and “the blessings of life.”

Gehrig’s eloquent expression of gratitude in the face of an inexorable decline and death has lost none of its power. Indeed, it seems almost unbelievable in 2019, standing as it does at the opposite pole from the egotism, avarice, crudeness, and sense of entitlement and victimhood exhibited all too often by contemporary athletes, including some members of the U.S. women’s soccer team, who seem so resentful despite earning sums that Gehrig and his contemporaries could not even have imagined.

To be sure, Gehrig stood out even in 1939, which is why his number was the first ever to be retired and why he was voted into the Baseball Hall of Fame in a special election the same year he retired.

But Gehrig’s fellow athletes also knew that, whatever their own inclinations may have been, they could not publicly act in the way Megan Rapinoe and her teammates have done. Not only do today’s athletes know that they can swear and boast and dishonor the flag and belittle large swaths of the public at will, they know that they will be praised for what they have done, as long as the people they belittle are suitably “deplorable.”

In his speech, Gehrig gave many cogent reasons for considering himself to be “the luckiest man on the face of the earth.” I’ll add another: Gehrig lived at a time when the culture believed sports should transcend politics and also demanded that athletes act with a modicum of dignity in public.

We need more Iron Horse and less braying donkey.

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