



PHYSICALITY

photo by Manette Gonzalez

by Beau Dure

In the 1990s, Mia Hamm could dominate a soccer game however she wanted. She had skill, but she also had the kind of speed and athleticism that left college and international defenders alike chasing in vain.

As Hamm grew older and the opponents grew better, her game evolved.

"She deserves a lot of credit," University of Virginia Head Coach Steve Swanson says. "Some players never change their game. She just became a more complete player as she got older. I oftentimes don't think she gets enough credit for being such a complete player. Not only could she beat players [1v1] at the end of her career, but she could combine and beat players by her final pass."

United States Soccer today is trying to go through that same evolution in order to stay on top in women's soccer. The athleticism and desire hailed in hundreds of inspirational books and Gatorade ads aren't enough. Today's elite player has to have the technical and tactical acumen to match up with sophisticated soccer teams around the world.

"The difference now is those fast players, those really athletically gifted players now also are technically and tactically capable," said Cindy Parlow Cone, a former US

Women's National Team forward and current coach of the Portland Thorns FC of the National Women's Soccer League.

"In the past, center midfielders were the most technical and tactical players for the most part, and the center backs read the game the best and anticipated things, but not everyone had to be technical and tactical on the team. I think that has changed now. In every single position, even as a goalkeeper, you have to be technically sound with your feet, and you've got to be tactically organizing."

The United States has taken a few bold steps in this direction in recent years — reaching overseas to hire Pia Sundhage and then Tom Sermanni as women's national team coaches, and hiring April Heinrichs (technical director) and Jill Ellis (development director) to work full time on player development.

But the message isn't new.

"This has been going on for a while," Swanson said. "We won the World Cup in 1991. In 1995 we did not. After that tournament, in my opinion, we went back and decided we're going to have to move the ball better. To me at the national team level, I think Tony [DiCicco] made that decision. We've got to be better at moving the ball. We've got to be a little

more sophisticated. We can't rely on our ability just to break down teams with one-on-one attacking."

The Curriculum

The men's game is dealing with this change as well. Fueled by perceived flaws in US national teams and perhaps a bit of Barcelona envy, US Soccer has herded its top boys teams into a Development Academy and developed a comprehensive development curriculum that isn't specifically limited to boys, but most strictly applied to the Development Academy clubs.

The curriculum emphasizes sophisticated skills—receiving the ball while moving, shooting from a variety of distances, keeping close control, using turns to evade defenders, playing the ball from the back rather than booting it upfield, and playing a one- or two-touch game.

Anson Dorrance, who coached the 1991 USWNT to victory in the first Women's World Cup and has coached college powerhouse North Carolina for three decades, sees the curriculum's lessons filtering into the Elite Clubs National League (ECNL). A lot of clubs have teams in the Academy and the ECNL or other top leagues, after all.

"Obviously US Soccer has more direct control over the boys' Academies, but please don't think the women aren't seeing what's happening on the boys Academy side and trying to emulate it," Dorrance said.

But there's another issue with youth soccer that may be harder to fight. Players and parents like trophies. Trophies aren't always a fair representation of how well players are developing—11-year-olds typically won't have the sort of skill and tactical sense to neutralize faster, stronger 11-year-olds.

And the temptation is to shop around for the club that offers the best chance to win trophies rather than the best soccer development.

"We have all these different organizations that are trying to attract all the players, but in doing so, it's kind of watered down the soccer landscape," Swanson said. "Everybody's competing and playing, and the development's not there. I'd sure like to see us get on one page for the good of the whole game."

"If I look at a youth team's record and see they're 102-0, that's great, but are they developing their players?"

The College Game

Then college coaches face a similar temptation.

"I worry sometimes we're part of the problem," Swanson said. "We're offering players scholarships at a very young age. If we're going to take a chance, we're going to be more apt to take a chance on a physical player who's got the athletic tools as opposed to somebody that's developed their soccer sense and developed their techniques over time."

Yet the biggest ongoing debate in the college game is the freedom to use far more substitutions than international and professional games allow. The rules change from time to time, but players can take a break at some point during a game and come back in with fresher legs.

Swanson has coached under college and international rules, leading the United States to victory in the 2012 U-20 Women's World Cup. He sees collegians playing a slightly different sport, running and pressing in ways that would be less feasible if fatigue set in.

"Prior to my experience in the World Cup, I maybe wouldn't have as much appreciation as I do now," Swanson said. "If you're not having a great game [internationally], you have to sort that out and get that right. You have to pick and choose your moments when to press. If you turn the ball over a lot and other teams are possessing it, you're going to be defending for a long period of time."

When you're able to make six or seven subs after 20 minutes, that game's going to be different.

"I've seen the evolution of club soccer—I think more clubs are valuing the ball, they're developing more technical players. That has filtered through to colleges. I think there are more colleges that are playing a possession style without relying as much on physical demands. But it's a little slower than some others, and I think it's because of the rules."

Still, Swanson thinks dropping to three substitutions for the entire 90 to 120 minutes may be a little too drastic for college soccer. Dorrance points to one reason why such a change might not fly: "When a kid comes to college, they should have an opportunity to play, rather than sit and watch for 90 minutes because they're not a starter."

And Dorrance sees some advantages to the college game. When Dorrance was chairman of the NCAA rules committee, he tried to limit



photo by Ruth Moore

substitutions, leaning on his experience as US national team coach. Then, he says, he changed his mind under the influence of Dutch coach Raymond Verheijen's "periodization" philosophy, which says players should learn to play at high speed and then rest rather than play badly.

"So I think there are sort of two ways to get to the same location," Dorrance says. "One way is certainly to limit substitutions, to get a player that can't play 90 minutes at a sprint to know when to take his breaks. The other way is to substitute him when he can't play any more and try to get him to expand the amount of time he's sprinting. Right now, I'm in that camp. I would like to suggest this might be the best way to develop the elite player."

College athletes could get the best of both worlds if they played their primary fall season as is but experimented with FIFA substitution rules in the less-publicized spring seasons. But the NCAA limits soccer activity in the spring.

And that, for Parlow Cone, is another issue, perhaps a more pressing problem for player development than the rules. The meaningful games are all compressed into a brief fall campaign.

"It's so many games in a short period of time," Cone says. "You spend so much time playing games and recovering from games that there's not as much training

going on and developing of players. You're literally spending more of your time either resting from a game or getting up for a game."

So regardless of the rules, spreading out the competitive games across two seasons would be a win-win from Cone's perspective.

"That would be great because then you would get a lot more player development," Cone says. "And it's better for them academically as well. If you play one game a week, you can treat them somewhat like professionals."

Athleticism Still Counts

Whatever else happens in soccer, it's still a sport that will favor fast, strong athletes. Some youth development theorists think young players should avoid specializing in one sport, steering clear of burnout and repetition injuries in soccer while building their athletic base in multiple activities.

"You're still looking for the three fundamental elements of athletic character, which are self-discipline, competitive fire and self-belief," Dorrance said. "So we're still trying recruit that player. That's the same player we've always tried to recruit. It's not just a competitive player, it's a player that believes in herself, it's also a player that's willing to work hard. ... So that hasn't changed. What we're trying to do

is to also see if we can continue to attract players that have those three qualities but also love the ball and love the game."

"[Players] still have that athleticism, they still have that aggressiveness," Cone said. "They've just combined it with technical ability as well as good tactics, both individual tactics and team tactics."

The question is whether this tactical and technical growth is happening more quickly elsewhere.

"I still think we've got a ways to go," Swanson said. "There's not enough teams that value the ball. There's not enough teams that play together as a team on both sides of the ball. We've got to do a better job of not just possessing the ball but possessing the ball in the other team's half where we're creating chances. It's one thing to possess the ball in the back where there's not much pressure.

"When you look around the world, there's a lot of growth in women's soccer in so many countries around the world, technically and tactically. Although we've grown, I'm not sure we've grown relative to other countries in terms of how they're advancing their games."

And if there's one thing US Soccer can count on, it's the fact that these other countries are going to keep striving to improve.

"The game's never going to go backwards," Swanson says. "The game's changing all the time." ■



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