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Getting Back What We Lost in Soccer's Divorce

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**Author**

Doyle, J

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# Recovering from soccer's divorce



A general view of the opening ceremonies at the 2011 Women's World Cup.

SpecialtoFoxSoccer

JENNIFER DOYLE

Updated Jul 7, 2011 4:58 PM ET

What do Germany, France, Brazil and England have in common, besides the fact they all made it to the quarterfinals of the Women's World Cup?

The national football associations of each country have all banned the women's game.

The longest of these bans was England's, ending on the cusp of its 50-year anniversary, in 1971. The most recent was Brazil's, issued under its dictatorship and lifted only in 1979.

West Germany banned the game from 1955 until 1970. East Germany, however, did not – some of today's strongest German clubs are former GDR sides (e.g. Potsdam's Turbine, which formed in 1971).

Other things most of us don't know: We like to say that the Rose Bowl crowd for the final for the 1999 Women's World Cup (90,185) was the largest audience ever assembled for a women's sporting event. You've probably heard this, in fact, in coverage of this World Cup.

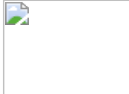
But records indicate that an audience of 100,000 gathered at the Azteca for the final of a 1971 Women's World Cup in Mexico City, which was not even remotely sanctioned by FIFA. If FIFA didn't bother the organizers with the use of the "Copa Mundial" brand, it was because they assumed no one would care, or notice if a bunch of women took the field.


Mexico played Denmark in the final, and lost (3-0).

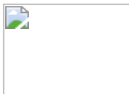
## HISTORY WOMEN'S INTERNATIONAL COMPETITION

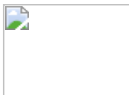
The FIFA World Cup era in women's soccer may have started in 1991, but major international competition has a rich history predating the inaugural *Copa Mundial*.

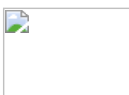
YEAR	COMP.	LOCATION	FINAL
1970	Coppa del Mondo	Italy	Denmark 2-0 Italy
1971	Mundial	Mexico	Denmark 3-0 Mexico
1982	Mundialito	Italy	Italy 3-1 West Germany
1985	Mundialito	Italy	England 3-2 Italy

- 

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The history of women's soccer is filled with surprising information. Looking around the world, we learn of women's leagues started in Goa, India during the 1970s by players who expected opposition, but were instead surprised by the assistance they got from brothers and friends; we find Bengali women's tournaments that have drawn crowds the WPS would envy; a quasi-professional club representing Brazil (Esporte Clube Radar) in international tournaments through the 1980s; matches played on the beaches of Rio which have involved thousands of women.

1986	Mundialito	Italy	Italy 1-0 USA
1988	Mundialito	Italy	England 2-1 Italy
1988	FIFA Women's Invitational	China	Norway 1-0 Sweden

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One of football history's earliest (and surely coolest) night matches was a 1920 women's game in England: anti-aircraft searchlights were used to light a field for charity match between the Dick, Kerr's Ladies Football Club and an all-star squad of players from "the rest of England." Twelve thousand people showed up for that one. This is nothing compared to the 52,000 people who came to see that same squad play a 1920 Boxing Day match in Goodison Park. Thousands more were turned away.



Cover of the April 2011 edition of FIFA World, featuring the 1971 French national team boarding an airplane to play in the 1971 Mundial.

FIFA would like you to think that the first international women's match was played between France and the Netherlands in 1971, before 1,500 spectators. They've produced an article in the April 2011 issue of FIFA World celebrating this "fact." Sepp Blatter introduces

the story for us:

*"Although women have been kicking footballs informally for nearly as long as their male counterparts, the women's game is still relatively young in terms of officially organised international matches. Indeed, as you can read in this issue of FIFA World, this month marks the 40th anniversary of the first-ever official women's international, played in April 1971 between France and the Netherlands in front of 1,500 curious spectators. Certainly, the sport has enjoyed impressive growth from those humble beginnings to the spectacle that it is today."*

The FIFA brochure, however, shows the French national team boarding a plane to Mexico City, to play in the 1971 Not-FIFA World Cup mentioned above.

That was actually the second not-FIFA Women's World Cup – the first was played in 1970, in Italy.

I guess since these and other international matches were not sponsored by FIFA, and were played by women banned from their FIFA-associated football associations, they weren't really football matches?

One of this weekend's marquis matches will revisit the suppressed history of the women's game, as the Lionesses confront *Les Bleues*.

Abundant records show that the audience for the first *actual* international women's match was on par with attendance at games scheduled in this World Cup's smaller stadiums: 20,000 people turned out in 1920 to see the Dick, Kerr's ladies (representing England) beat French players, who were also popular in their country.

For all but FIFA, *that* is where the history of the international women's game begins: 91 years ago.

Nearly 900,000 people had seen the Dick, Kerr's Ladies play when the English FA issued its ban against the women's game in 1921 – and this ban (as the first) is the source of most of our, and FIFA's, forgetting.

These kinds of bans against women's football were not laws criminalizing the women's game. They were administrative rules designed to exile women from emerging national football cultures.

If you allowed women to play on a pitch approved by the FA for use in men's game, you lost your certification. If you had a license to referee the men's game and worked a women's match, you lost that license. Same for coaches.

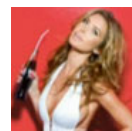
It didn't erase the women's game completely. As history shows us, it forced it underground. This should not erase decades of women playing the game from historical record.

For good and bad, the women's game retains the countercultural character born of the decades it has spent in exile. At nearly every level except the World Cup, it is relatively free from the brutal commercialism driving the management of the men's game into the ground (e.g. Liverpool, Manchester).

But women have struggled to gain the experience they need as managers, coaches, and referees. Advertisers and mass media outlets have lived for so long with the notion that nobody wants to watch the women's game, they refuse to unlearn that assumption – even when confronted with the success stories of the game's past and the evidence of the present.

It is important to remember that these bans were not directed only at women. They quite specifically targeted men interested in supporting the women's game – and, by implication, women interested in being involved in the men's game. They were designed to make it as difficult as possible for women to learn how to play, coach, referee, and manage a team. They worked to alienate women from men, and men from women. You couldn't be involved in the men's game *and* the women's. You had to choose.

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It was a football divorce, and we – who know so little about our own history – are its children. I don't think it's too melodramatic of me to suggest that we all lost something with those efforts to divide the game in half.



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stole from us – a sense of camaraderie that transcends the gender divide. A sense that women and men live in the same world, and play the same game, on the same pitch, by the same rules – that we can even play together. (Nearly every story about the childhood of women players begins with “[player] grew up playing with boys.”)

USA before the match against Sweden in the 2011 women's World Cup at the Arena Im Allerpark. (Valeria Witters/Witters Sport via US PRESSWIRE).

As we think about where we are going, we should remember the women and men of our grandmothers' generation who thought “ladies football” was a fabulous idea. We should remember the rambunctious squads of the 1960s who played on rugby grounds and formed independent national associations. Why not celebrate the women who played before 100,000 fans, in 1971? And let's remember those fans, too – each and every single one of them, standing on their feet for (of all things) *un Mundial Femenino*. They should be remembered, and cheered, too.

That makes for a much better story, right?

Better than the one that would have you believe that hardly anyone played before 1971 - and that if they did, nobody cared to watch.

*Dr. Jennifer Doyle is an Associate Professor in the English Department at the University of California, Riverside, where her research areas include American Literature, Visual Culture, Gender Studies and Critical Theory. Dr. Doyle maintains **From a Left Wing**, a blog devoted to the cultural politics of soccer. She will be contributing to FOX Soccer throughout the 2011 Women's World Cup.*

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