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America's Team

A sportswriter relives the glories of the United States women's soccer squad.

By ANDREA COOPER

THE GIRLS OF SUMMER

The U.S. Women's Soccer Team and How It Changed the World.

By Jere Longman.

Illustrated. 318 pp. New York:

HarperCollins Publishers. \$24.

A year ago, the United States women's soccer team kicked, headed and pounded its way to international fame, winning the World Cup and landing on posters, cereal boxes, magazine covers and "The Late Show With David Letterman." Boys wore Mia Hamm jerseys. Pre-teenage girls screamed for their new idols, and it wasn't the Back Street Boys -- or any boy at all. Americans who had barely noticed soccer before indulged in the thrill of this newfound game. A group of athletes became known for skill and teamwork, not self-indulgent antics, drug use or skirmishes with the police.

But change the world? Did the women really accomplish that, even given their record as gold medalists at the 1996 Summer Olympics and two-time World Cup champions?

It is tempting to dismiss the subtitle of Jere Longman's enjoyable account, "The Girls of Summer: The U.S. Women's Soccer Team and How It Changed the World," as sportswriting hyperbole. However, Longman makes a plausible case that the team's accomplishments, seen and discussed by millions around the world, have already changed the way we view female athletes and, by extension, all women. For example, he notes that the Egyptian Soccer Federation officially approved women's participation in 1996 a few days after the Americans' Olympic victory was broadcast in Cairo. In Iran, where women are still not allowed into stadiums as spectators, girls can play soccer in schoolyards, albeit in long coats, pants and scarves.

He gives a balanced assessment of controversial subjects, from the sexual harassment lawsuit filed by one of the players against a former coach to Brandi Chastain's nude photograph in the men's magazine *Gear*. Longman clearly grasps the players' conflicting emotions and behavior regarding the double standard in sports: men need only be athletic; women must be athletic and beautiful.

Longman, who is a sportswriter at The New York Times, covered the 1999 Women's World Cup, spending nearly every day with the American players from May through the conclusion of the tournament on July 10. When he writes what a player was thinking at a crucial moment, the reader believes him. But one wonders whether Longman's closeness to the players leads him to gloss over their faults. When he mentions poor grades that Chastain earned at college and then junior college, Longman describes her as "falling into traps that kids fall into when they become untethered for the first time." And his prose, while entertaining, stumbles occasionally when he tries too hard to say the ordinary in new ways, as when he writes that World Cup organizers chose to "sheathe women's sports in the image condom of heterosexuality."

The book concludes with the end of the fairy tale: a disputed indoor victory tour after the World Cup, the resignation of the coach, Tony DiCicco, and the poor treatment of the team by the United States Soccer Federation. Among other insults, the federation declined to begin negotiations for a new contract with the players for five months after they won the World Cup, then made a low-ball offer. When listing accomplishments for 1999, the federation ranked a third-place finish by the men's team in a regional tournament over the women's world championship. The federation's lack of money in the 1980's meant the women's soccer team traveled under conditions few other professional athletes would tolerate, from flying to Italy on a cargo plane to staying in Chinese hotels so filthy the players slept in their clothes. Longman contends that the federation does not come close to appreciating the sacrifices, value or influence of the women's team.

Of course, the story is not over. In two months, members of the American team will defend its standing in the Olympics. It will take longer than that to determine if they have made a lasting change in the world, as Longman asserts. In 10 or 20 years, there might very well be a stronger case to be made.

Andrea Cooper is writing a personal account of a women's white-water rafting trip.