



STILL KICKING?

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The U.S. women's soccer team is playing for more than just a repeat championship in this year's World Cup, they are fighting to attract enough sponsors to revive the women's professional soccer league.

Just five days before the World Cup kicked off, the Women's United Soccer Association (WUSA) announced it was shutting down after three seasons. The WUSA said lack of revenue forced it to throw in the towel.

Declining crowds

Despite the excitement over women's soccer following the 1999 World Cup, the WUSA failed to draw big enough crowds and attract a large television audience. Attendance per game dipped by nearly 1,500 fans since 2001 and the league struggled to attract more than 100,000 households for televised games.

This decline, coupled with a weak economy, deterred corporate sponsors from signing up to support the budding league. To advertisers, backing women's soccer was a risk they were not willing to take.

To the fans, the WUSA stood for boundless opportunity. It offered the chance to be like Mia. Just like the boys, girls could go pro.

The fate of the U.S. Women's soccer league

The collapse of the WUSA raises questions about the fate of the dominant U.S. women's soccer team and the future of professional women's sports.

Nineteen of the 20 U.S. team members now in the World Cup played in the WUSA. It offered a spotlight for young athletes and served as a training ground to develop the finest women soccer players in the world.

Mia Hamm is one of four 30-something players likely to make this Cup their last. And their cleats will be hard to fill. Hamm has an astounding 142 international goals, the career leader for a female or male. Midfielder Kristine Lilly has played in more international games than any woman or man.

The future of professional women's sports

The fear is that the failure of the WUSA marks a downward turn for professional women's sports in general. The weak economy severely limits corporate sponsorship. In the case of the WUSA, its business plan called for eight sponsors contributing \$2.5 million in order to sustain a fourth session. They only received two.

The pro women's basketball league, the WNBA, has suffered similar attendance and viewership declines. As a result, the WNBA has had three teams fold, most recently the Cleveland Rockers, which made the playoffs last season.

However, unlike the WUSA, the WNBA is linked with the NBA, which provides financial, personnel and stadium support.

The LPGA, the women's golf league, has been successful marketing to its audience and benefited from stars like Annika Sorenstam, who played on the men's PGA tour, and young phenomenon Michelle Wie. And women's tennis has secured its place as a healthy professional sport.

Despite the bad news for soccer, WUSA players are not ready to throw in the towel.

"We push through, and hopefully this World Cup will stimulate some potential sponsors and investors," Hamm said in *The New York Times*.

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