

INTERNATIONALIZING FOOTBALL: THE WOMEN'S WORLD CUP 2003-2019

Paralleling the professionalization of women's club football, interest in international tournaments, particularly the FIFA World Cup and women's competition at the Olympics, has continued to grow. Using the quadrennial structure of the men's tournament, the FIFA Women's World Cup was next [held in 2003](#) following the landmark 1999 event in the USA. Originally scheduled for a second edition in China, the [SARS outbreak](#) forced FIFA - in consultation with the World Health Organization - to [move the tournament](#) only months before the scheduled September start. FIFA decided to return the event to the USA with little preparation time, however in smaller stadiums, with "doubleheaders", increased security requirements due to the 9/11 attacks, and a less than ideal fall schedule that bumped into American gridiron football and baseball seasons. Despite the challenges, the tournament continued to draw significant audiences both in the stadiums and on television. [Germany, now an established football force](#), knocked out the host USA and defeated Sweden in the final.

The World Cup returned to [China for the 2007](#) edition - a consolation for moving the 2003 tournament - with nearly 1.2 million spectators attending the 32 matches. [Germany captured its second consecutive title](#), defeating Brazil. Reflecting the increasing professionalization of the women's game, participating teams received financial rewards based on their performance - one million USD awarded to the champions. The 2007 World Cup also marked the elevation of [Brazilian forward Marta to superstar](#) status. The six-time FIFA World Player of the Year, Marta's 7 goals in China added to the 3 scored in 2003. Considered the greatest player of all-time, as well as a [UN Women Goodwill Ambassador](#), Marta has been compared to compatriot Pelé at home in Brazil - and recently announced the [2023 tournament will be her last](#).

At the height of the [European debt crisis](#), the 2011 the [World Cup moved to Germany](#) for its sixth edition. Despite the host team's failure to capture a third consecutive title, attendance numbers continued to be strong for the tournament, and television coverage of Germany 2011 pushed technologies and viewership to new heights. Prominent broadcasters around the world, including Al Jazeera in the Middle East and North Africa [presented the tournament](#) to newer audiences. In an attempt to continue the global advancement of women's football, FIFA announced new allocations to diversify the tournament field - and demanded that a [minimum one-third](#) of a confederation's FA's enter teams into the qualification process. In years prior, a significant number of African (CAF) and Middle Eastern (AFC)

nations had withdrawn. To reinforce this growing internationalization of women's football, [Japan became the first Asian nation](#) to win the World Cup, defeating the powerful Americans in front of [Vice-President Joe Biden](#) and other political dignitaries in a penalty shootout. Also reflecting the new social media revolution, the final - [decided in a penalty shoot-out](#) - set a then-[record for most "tweets per second"](#) on Twitter.

The [2015 tournament](#) returned to North America - this time hosted by [Canada who lost](#) out to the German bid in 2011. Canadian critics blamed to the Federal Government's lukewarm support for the failed bid - sending a video rather than a delegation of high-ranking officials as the Germans had done. Featuring an [expanded 24-nation field](#), the seventh Women's World Cup was played, controversially, [on artificial turf](#). In the months leading up to the tournament, a group of international women's players [launched a lawsuit against FIFA and the Canadian Soccer Association](#), arguing that the game's pinnacle event played on a "dangerous" synthetic surface violated Canadian gender equity laws. Although the lawsuit was eventually dropped, criticisms of the organizers continued throughout the tournament. The USA, vocal about the lack of grass fields, eventually defeated Japan 5-2 to [capture their third World Cup](#) title and earn \$2 million dollars (USD) - FIFA prize money doubled from 2011 but equivalent to less than 6% of the 2014 Men's champions pot. 1.3 million fans attended matches held across the country - with the notable exception of Toronto which was in preparations to host the 2015 Pan-American Games. The most watched Women's World Cup tournament globally, as well as [individual televised soccer game in USA history](#) (the final against Japan), almost 60% of the Canadian public [tuned into the tournament](#) including 10.1 million women (and half of girls aged 2-17 in the country).

In 2019, [France hosted the 8th edition of FIFA's Women's World Cup](#). Prior to making official bids, 7 nations (France, England, South Korea, New Zealand, South Africa, Sweden, and Japan) expressed an interest. In the end, only [France and South Korea formally bid](#), with the European nation easily securing host duties. The 2019 tournament would be the first to feature Video Assisted Replay (VAR) - but controversially all [15 VAR officials selected were men](#). The Women's World Cup, once again, was a commercial success. According to FIFA, [more than 1.2 billion people watched](#) the event, with the 260 million viewers of the live final doubling 2015 audiences. This massive global audience tuned in to watch the [United States defend the title](#), defeating the Netherlands in the final 2-0. In the USA, [more people watched the women's](#) final than the 2018 Men's World Cup final.

A recurring theme throughout the tournament was the reaction of the media to women's behaviour on the pitch in relation to their male counterparts. For example, at the end of the [England's 3-2 win over Cameroon](#), the African entrants players expressed their dissatisfaction with officiating throughout the tournament by engaging in rough play, protests, and general petulance - including one player allegedly spitting on an English player. In an op-ed piece for *The Guardian*, [Eni Aluko](#) condemned the Cameroonian response, but challenged the broader criticism of women's football, writing:

...some people who saw this game, one wild match in a tournament that has given us moments of greatness and also of disappointment, have announced that it proves women's football cannot be taken seriously...If every time you turn on the TV you need to be persuaded that the women's game is good enough, it's probably not for you.

The eventual winners, the USA, were also criticized for their behaviour during matches. During a 13-0 victory over Thailand in the group stage, American players celebrated wildly (and often with choreography) after every goal, leading to [charges of a lack of "sportsmanship"](#) for both running up the score and flaunting their success against inferior competition. In the semi-final against England, USA's star striker Alex Morgan appeared to mock her rivals with a [tea sipping celebration](#) after scoring the winning goal. The American team's apparent arrogance drew the ire of many - leading the US team (and others) to suggest this was a sexist response to behaviours male players engaged in regularly.

Further adding to the controversy of the USA team, Megan Rapinoe used her expanding platform to regularly [challenge United States President Donald Trump](#). In a pre-tournament interview, Rapinoe suggested her team [would not go to the White House](#), an American sport champion custom, if they won the tournament. Trump responded using his Twitter account, accusing Rapinoe of disrespecting the nation - making Rapinoe a lightning rod for American conservatives. But despite the controversies that followed her and the US Women's National Team throughout the 2019 tournament, Rapinoe earned the [Golden Boot](#) as top goal scorer while the Americans took home their 4th title.