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Sports & Recreation

Beyond Bend It Like Beckham: The Global Phenomenon of Women's Soccer
Timothy F. Grainey
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Like *A League of Their Own*, which brought light to the underreported and long-forgotten role of women in professional baseball, the 2002 feature film mentioned in Timothy Grainey's title gave a boost to women's soccer (albeit in a less historic manner). Grainey is a sports journalist who has written extensively about what everyone else in the world calls "football." In this mix of sociological considerations, the author covers many topics under the general umbrella of the game, but they always rotate on gender issues in one way ?or another.

In his opening section, he examines soccer's rapid growth in the United States, including the equal opportunities afforded by Title IX, the explosion of soccer as a sport for American youth, and, eventually, its almost inevitable move towards a female presence on an amateur and professional level. The intentions are the best, but after the novelty factor wears off, the pro teams have been beset by a vicious cycle of dwindling attendance, advertising support, and media interest, which invariably leads to a league's failure before a new venture comes along to try again.

The next section considers the challenges in other areas of the world, including the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America, each of which face a unique set of problems. In Iran, it's the religious restrictions and subservient role of women. (The rules for modest dress that dictate the all-concealing uniforms the players must wear put these athletes at a disadvantage against their competition.) In Latin America and Africa, it's the machismo attitudes that present a challenge. However, it is curious that the author does not go into as much detail for Asian countries, including the strong teams in Japan, for example.

In the final section of the book, Grainey returns to an examination of the way soccer is spreading and becoming more of a "serious" option for girls and women, citing, in particular, positive examples from Canada and European club and national teams.

A major focus of *Beyond*, Grainey reports, is the perception of female athletes as

“objects versus wholesome role models.” Even within the sport, there are those who hold the “whatever it takes” philosophy to get attention, even if includes pinup calendars or magazine photo shoots featuring members of the teams in various states of undress that have nothing to do with their athletic ability. “No matter how good the girls are as soccer players,” the author quotes a representative of the game, “that is not enough to get the recognition they deserve.”

Despite the many tribulations, Grainey believes things are getting better, if slowly. “In more and more countries, soccer is now seen as a normal and appropriate female activity,” he writes in his conclusion. He believes time and further experience will offer a future that is “very bright indeed.”?

Ron Kaplan