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WORLD CUP

The Biggest Threat to U.S. Women's Soccer Dominance: the European Superclubs

Recent investment from Europe's richest teams is trickling up to national squads and building World Cup contenders



Barcelona FC's forward Toni Duggan, right, celebrates her goal with teammates during a match against Atlético Madrid. The match drew 60,000 spectators. PHOTO: GABRIEL BOUYS/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

By Joshua Robinson

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PARIS—For two decades, the U.S. dominance of women's soccer was built on higher investment, superior infrastructure, and greater professionalism than its European rivals. Or, put another way, the U.S. dominance was built on many countries across the Atlantic simply not caring as much.

In the multibillion-dollar business of European soccer, the women's game was an afterthought. But if only a small piece of that revenue could be reinvested in women's teams, the thinking went, the whole balance of the game would change.

Well, it's happening. And right at the center of that movement is a group whose extreme wealth has already altered every other facet of soccer: the European superclubs.

In the four years since the last women's World Cup, clubs like Barcelona, Juventus, and Manchester City have reached into their deep pockets and poured money into their women's teams. While it remains a tiny fraction of what they spend on the men's side, a few million dollars have proven more than enough to raise the standard of the top European players dramatically.



Manchester City's Gemma Bonner and teammates during a training session at City Football Academy. PHOTO: MARTIN RICKETT/ZUMA PRESS

Now, as those players turn out for their national teams in France, there is no question that the biggest obstacle between the U.S. and a fourth world title is a crop of sides from Europe.

“With the big clubs coming in and giving the same infrastructure, the gap is closing,” said Bianca Rech, the sporting director of Bayern's women's team and a former defender for Germany. “I'm 100% sure you will see that at the World Cup.”

The first few days of the tournament have been a parade of European teams stocked with superclub talent. France, Spain, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden all won their opening matches against non-European opposition. Italy, playing at its first World Cup in 20 years, also stunned Australia on Sunday—with two goals from Juventus forward Barbara Bonansea.

“You feel that progress quickly, because there are more players training in excellent environments,” said veteran France midfielder Elise Bussaglia, who has played at both Lyon and Barcelona. “This could be a turning point.”

Why do the clubs do it? Because it's easy. Barcelona's annual budget for the women's team is €3.5 million (\$3.95 million). A club that size finds €3.5 million between the sofa cushions. While it wouldn't make a dent in the men's game—Barça pays Lionel Messi roughly that much every single month—it has realigned women's soccer.

“With little money, we’re achieving great results,” said Maria Teixidor, the Barcelona board member who oversees women’s soccer, “because we’re coming from zero.”



France's Eugenie Le Sommer, right, celebrates with Wendie Renard after scoring a goal against Norway. PHOTO: VALERY HACHE/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

Every major club taking the short hop into women’s soccer has a similar story. The first step is a small financial commitment to make the teams fully professional. That means players no longer have to hold down day jobs or train late in the evenings.

Then they install the team at the same state-of-the-art training facilities used by the men and the elite youth academies, whether that is La Masia at Barcelona or the sprawling Etihad Campus at Manchester City. Bayern Munich, for instance, had fielded a women’s team since 1970, but its 2017 move into the \$80 million Bayern Campus in Munich is now seen as the launch of the program’s modern era.

“It was like a new start for us,” Rech said.

That gives the clubs access to the same world-class medical teams, nutrition and physical conditioning, and the women’s sides also have dedicated staffs of up to a dozen people. Until a few years ago, most would have been lucky to have a manager, an assistant, and a goalkeeping coach.

“In the men’s game if you want to grow you have to really work on the details,” said Juventus’ head of women’s soccer, Stefano Braghin. “In women’s football, the gaps are still very big...You can gain a lot in little time.”

In Juve’s case, it was just two years. After more than a century of existence without a women’s side, the club known as Italian soccer’s “Old Lady” finally launched one in 2017. Now, the Old Lady is a dynasty. In two seasons, Juve has won two Serie A titles and lost a grand total of three league games.



Barbara Bonansea of Italy scores the winning goal against Australia. PHOTO: TULLIO M. PUGLIA/GETTY IMAGES

For that kind of dominance on the men's side, where it has won eight titles in a row, Juve spends hundred

s of millions of euros a year. The cost of crushing the competition in the women's game: negligible. And, while they're at it, Juve and others expand their footprint, generate publicity, and develop new supporters. For a recent match against Fiorentina, the club offered free admission and drew 40,000 fans to Juventus Stadium. (Atlético Madrid and Barcelona did the same for a record women's crowd of 60,000 at the Wanda Metropolitano stadium in March.)

"The secret is that you can provide a lot without using more resources, because most of the things are already in place," Braghin said.

It didn't take long for national teams to start reaping the benefits of the superclubs' sudden interest. The top teams are magnets for the best talent in each country, and the best talent in each country is developed at the top teams. So Italy's decision to call up eight Juventus players to its 23-woman World Cup squad was no coincidence. Neither was France's naming seven starters for its World Cup opener from Olympique Lyonnais, the New York Yankees of women's soccer—or six more for its 2-1 victory over Norway on Wednesday.

Germany, meanwhile, is leaning on seven players from Bayern Munich at this tournament and Spain brought 15 players from just two clubs, Barcelona and Atlético Madrid.

In fact, just six European teams (Lyon, Barça, Chelsea, Manchester City, Paris Saint-Germain, and Bayern) sent a combined 73 players to this World Cup. That's exactly as many who came to this World Cup from the U.S.'s nine-team National Women's Soccer League.

Those players have never better equipped for a World Cup than they are right now. The newly professional clubs all agree. The first thing they noticed after making their players full-time was a sudden, dramatic improvement in fitness. Manchester City's director of women's soccer Gavin Makel said that within a year, his squad of internationals had become quicker, stronger, and ran harder deep into games.



A general view of the Wanda Metropolitano stadium for a March 17 match between Atlético Madrid and FC Barcelona. PHOTO: KIKO HUESCA (ES-ES/ZUMA PRESS)

The greatest advantage of American women's soccer was eroding before his eyes.

“In Europe, technically and tactically the standard is very, very high,” Makel said. “Physically, we’ve needed to do a bit more work to get to that level. But that is coming.”

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

The U.S. dominance of women's soccer was built on higher investment, superior infrastructure, and greater professionalism than its European rivals How much has the gap closed? Join the discussion.

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