

HOW THEY WON THE CUP

DiCicco discusses the strengths of the Women's National Team

Following is a report by former U.S. Women's National Team coach Tony DiCicco which he made at the NSCAA/adidas Soccer Symposium held in San Jose, Calif. The symposium was held on the NCAA Division I College Cup weekend Dec. 3-5.

By Tony DiCicco

These are areas in which the Women's National Team performed with distinction during the '99 Women's World Cup:

Defensively

- There was an overall commitment to defend and a tremendous collective work ethic.
- The team was able to follow the defensive game plan.
- The team was able to eliminate the impact of the personality players of other teams; these included Akide (Nigeria), Prinz (Germany), Sissi (Brazil) and Sun (China).
- The team had the discipline not to pick up yellow cards. Best example was first half versus Nigeria.
- We had outstanding goalkeeping in Briana Scurry.

Offensively

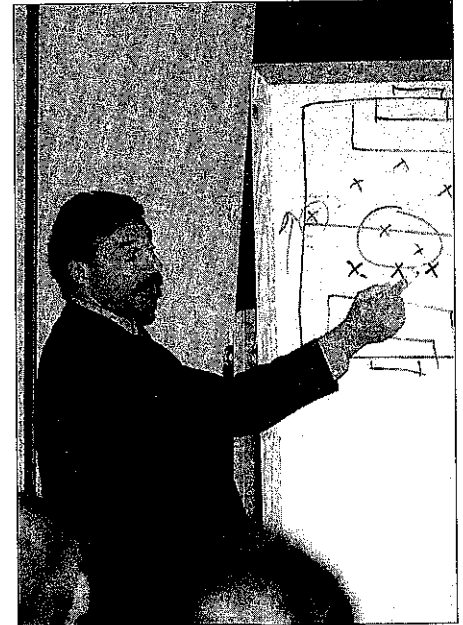
- Scored 18 goals against the toughest schedule of the tournament (South Korea, Germany, Nigeria, Brazil and China); many goals were of excellent quality.
- Outstanding execution of set pieces.
- Balanced scoring from front runners as well as other lines of

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- the team.
- Aggressive 1 v. 1 attitude.
- Scored all five of team's penalty kicks in the World Cup final.

WHY DID THE U.S.A. WIN?

- The psychology of the team was one of the right mentality and level of commitment; "Find a way to win" was the attitude in every game; the team was unwilling to lose.
- An ability to play within the game plan. Against Nigeria we knew it was going to be a rough game and yet there was no letup even after Nigeria scored first. Did not lose composure.
- Team experience. Majority of starters have over 100 caps, had been there, done that.
- Support from the reserve players and contributions from the staff. Shannon MacMillan could have been a starter, accepted a reserve role and was a tremendous asset coming off the bench. Knowing and accepting individual roles was crucial.
- Attention to detail, both on and off the field. Every field scenario covered. Off field the parents had been a problem in '95. The '99 parents had two liaisons who worked with the staff to take care of parent-related issues (from parking to tickets to rooms to meals) so that players had only to worry about playing. Charter flights helped overcome tight schedules which were arranged to help showcase the team, but also demanded a lot of travel for the team.
- Mental toughness. Team was unwilling to accept any result other than winning.



Tony DiCicco discussing the U.S. team's systems of play. (Photo by Perry McIntyre Jr.)

WHY AND HOW WE USED THE 4-3-3 SYSTEM:

- We are the only team in the world to use three strikers and this causes a difficult adjustment for foreign teams.
- Two ways to play three strikers. Play all three in a central alignment (1996 U.S. Olympic Team) (See Diagram I) or play with a central striker and the two outside strikers wide (like traditional wingers) (See Diagram II). U.S. played the latter system in WWC '99.
- Previously the U.S. played 3-4-3 with the four midfielder alignment having the two outside midfielders creating width. The weakness was that two central midfielders had too much space to cover, especially when Julie Foudy and Tisha Venturini were both offensive-minded central midfielders in terms of style of play. When both attacked, the team was vulnerable to counterattack. Teams were coming through midfield and creating difficult matchups with our only central back. The three backs were also sometimes overmatched at the international level, especially when their shape was flat.
- Following the loss in the '95 World Cup the system was revised with change taking place in final three-back alignment. Here rather than the former man-to-man system, the team changed to 3-4-3 with three defenders playing a zone with a slight diagonal alignment created by the positioning of the weak side back. (See Diagram III) (The zonal system was discussed by assistant coach Lauren Gregg in the

January-February 1999 issue of *Soccer Journal*.)

The defensive basis of the 3-4-3 system is that the total team commitment to pressure the ball in the front and middle segments of the field will make it more difficult for teams to serve dangerous balls out of the back.

- The three front is valuable in that no other team in the world plays three strikers. Teams are used to having four backs against two strikers. With our three strikers they have to rethink things. Also our two wide strikers are very good defenders and thus we can pressure well against an opponent's outside backs when possession is lost. This is different from the men's game with the three strikers aligned more centrally, and the intent is for the outside backs to attack down the flanks. This doesn't work in the women's game where the ability to cover that much ground up and down the flanks is not the same.
- We also wanted to protect the central area of the field and so we went to three midfielders. These included two attacking midfielders (Foudy, Venturini or Kristine Lilly) who were more free to attack and backed them up with a holding midfielder, Michele Akers. She is a quarterback type of player, who reads the game well and the role suited her more limited physical capabilities.

With the three forwards aligned across the width of the field and with the two attacking midfielders in behind them, the five attacking players were placed in what used to be

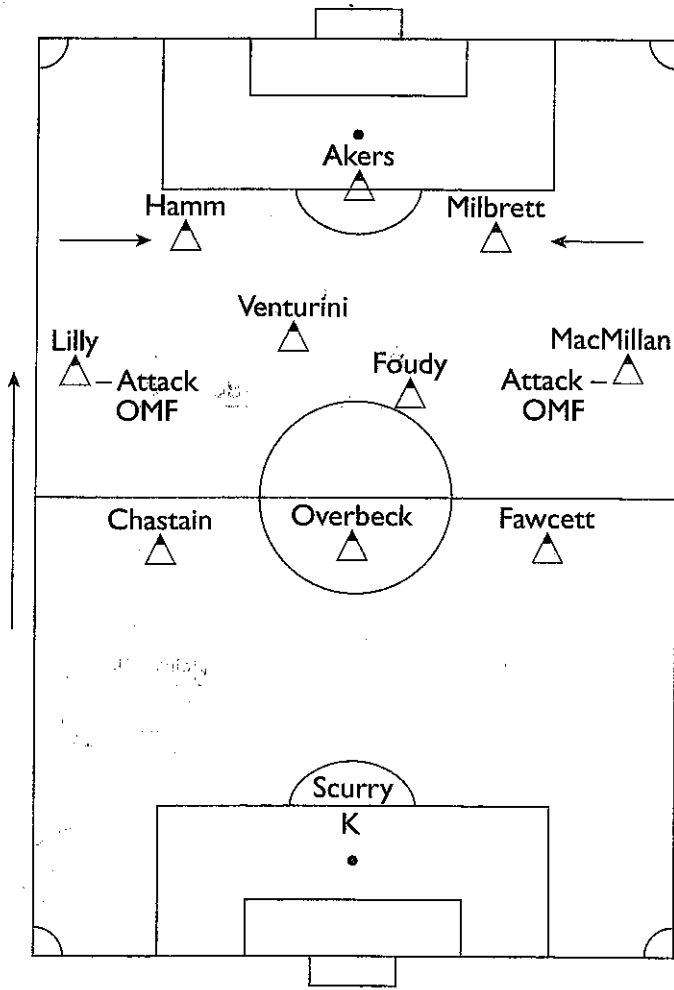


Diagram I — 1996 U.S. Olympic Team 3-4-3

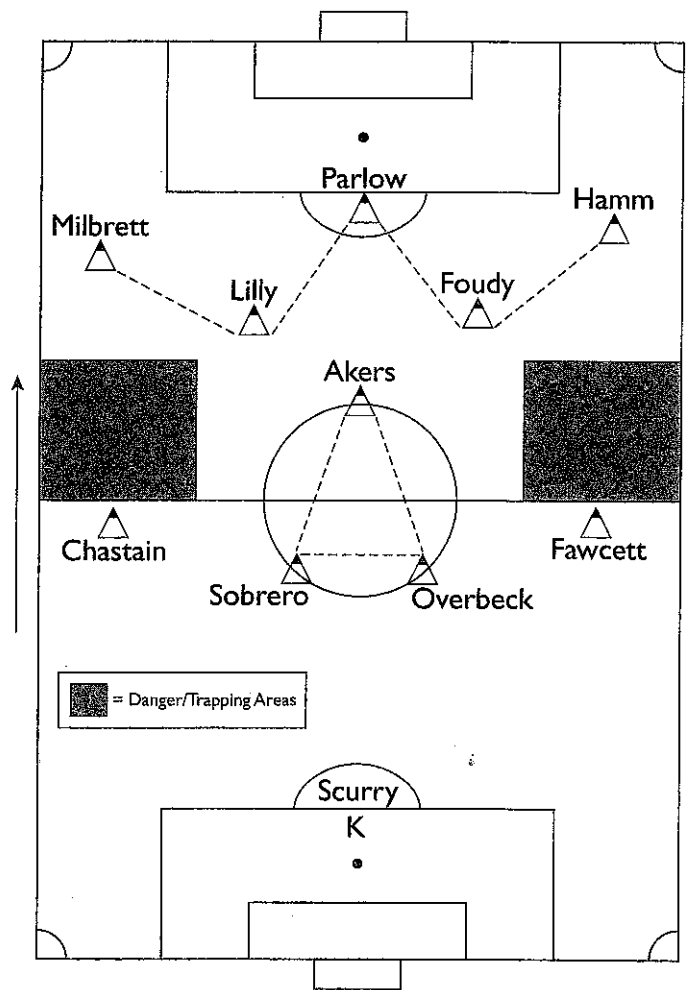


Diagram II — 4-3-3 U.S. Women's Team WWC '99

termed the W formation. (Review Diagram II)

- Defensively we went to a four-back, zonal type system.

With the holding midfielder we now had trapping areas in front of our central defenders for dealing with the counterattack. We felt with the holding midfielder and the four backs we could handle any attack.

Attacking areas of the field for opponents were on the outside flanks of the field. Here are trapping areas and this played into our high pressure defense. To counter we had our outside back rotate and become outside midfielders both offensively and defensively. Both Brandi Chastain and Joy Fawcett are good at defending — and attacking. When one of the outside backs moves up, the other three backs also rotate toward the ball. In a sense we move to three backs and five midfielders almost seamlessly. (See Diagram IV)

A weakness in the 4-3-3 is that this defensive rotation exposes the weakside midfield area and this must be countered defensively by the offside forward moving back to cover that space. In essence when the ball is lost and the team is initially defending, the 4-3-3 becomes a 4-4-2. As noted, the system can also resemble a 3-5-2 depending on the rotation of the outside back and the weakside forward's movements.

A second problem relates to any four midfielder system. Width needs to be recreated by a sharing of work by either the outside backs attacking or through wide attacking runs

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out of the midfield. And that takes experience and training. The inability of Santa Clara to create width was its undoing against Notre Dame. It is a challenge. The U.S. used Mia Hamm to open up space on the outside and runs from the midfield into such spaces by Foudy and others helped establish that width. They also were difficult for the opposition to track. (See Diagram V)

The 4-3-3 is ideal for our current team in that all five attackers — Tiffeny Milbrett, Cindy Parlow, Hamm, Lilly and Foudy — are versatile and interchangeable. Akers has the ability to read the game centrally. The outside backs can attack and defend and the central backs, Carla Overbeck and

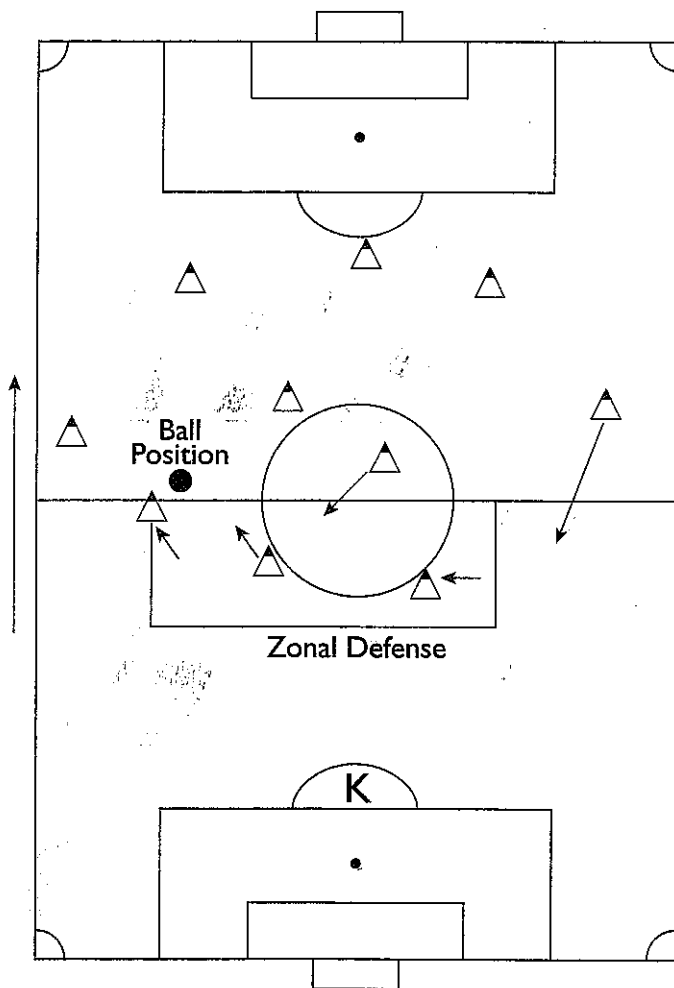


Diagram III — 3-4-3 Defensive rotations

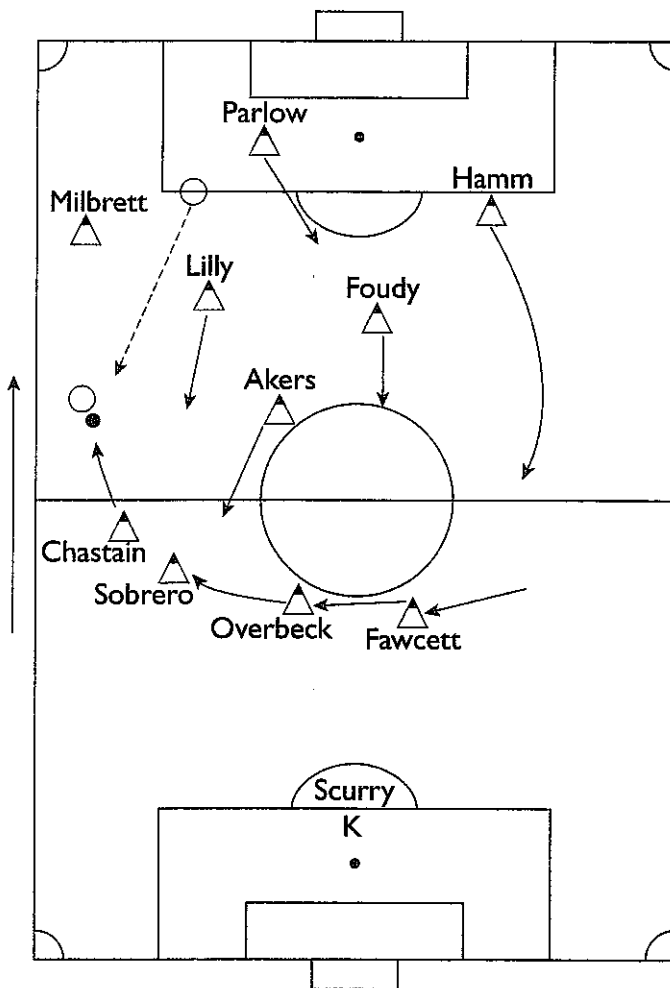


Diagram IV — Rotation of backs and weakside midfielders as 4-3-3 becomes a 4-4-2

Kate Sobrero, are solid defenders.

The real weakness is that if opponents possess the ball in the midfield they can change their point of attack quickly to the weak side of the field. But we hope that our weak side forward can come back to cover that area.

OTHER POINTS OF EMPHASIS:

- Use videotape with discretion. Don't overdo and be over-critical. "Catch them being good" was the coaching motto. Find positive corrections or emphasize the good more than poor aspects of play. Coach the positive. Try it for a week. Players will love it. Before China, we only showed players the positive aspects of their play even though we were not playing at our highest level.
- Every system has a rotation to it to cover potential danger areas.
- Women's game has evolved to a higher level from the 40-minute halves played in the '91 World Cup in China.
- Need to develop elite professional league here. World's best players will combine with ours to make it a competitive league. Also help in continued development of our U.S. team.
- Colleen Hacker worked with reserve players to help them accept team roles. Key was to have reserves "buy into" roles. Needed only to see body language of our players on the bench to know that they accepted roles. Used U.S. men's

experience in France to reinforce how not to behave.

- Key to continuance of the U.S. as a premier team will be development of new team culture once current leadership exits. Currently Overbeck and Foudy are leaders, setting the tone for team on and off the field. Coaches need internal leadership to be totally effective. Values are established within the team itself.
- Hamm's attitude when she missed her physical fitness timed run (she ran the test again after barely missing her target) is the type of action that inspires others.
- Defensively, team tries to force play centrally all the time.
- Studied trends on dead balls and noted that hard inswingers are the rule. Used them and screens to set up shots on goal. Also the rule on short corners is to play to the far post, not the near post.
- On the goal versus Germany the mistake was that Scurry is inconsistent in her coming out. Also preference is to play the ball back quickly with the keeper acting like a sweeper but timing was off on everyone's part in relation to that goal. Needed body communication between Chastain and Scurry. Crowd noise was a problem. What was important was facial expressions as seen on players' faces after the goal. They knew, as difficult as it was, they had to put that mistake behind them.

AREAS OF NEEDED IMPROVEMENT PRIOR TO AUSTRALIA OLYMPICS 2000:

Defensively

- Team needs to work on closing, pressurizing and controlling attackers.
- Individual defending needs work.
- Clearing needs to be cleaner (long, wide, high and accurate).
- Understanding your defensive zone as ball moves is another aspect of play needing attention.
- Defensive coordination and communication between defensive links within the systems of the team need training. This includes coordination/communication between outside backs/midfielders, backs/goalkeepers and midfielders/forwards.

Offensively

- Possession: Need to avoid turning into pressure. Also recognize when to change the point of attack. Need to be patient in the final third of the field.
- Balance between going forward quickly to counterattack or holding ball for secure possession.
- Front runners need technical work on holding the ball when under pressure. Also work at creating rhythm, work at turning and facing, work on penetrating with the first touch, improving 1 v. 1 mentality and confidence.
- Box organization: quality of runs, timing of runs, recycling of runs.
- Quality of flank service needs improvement.
- Finishing of quality chances. ⚽

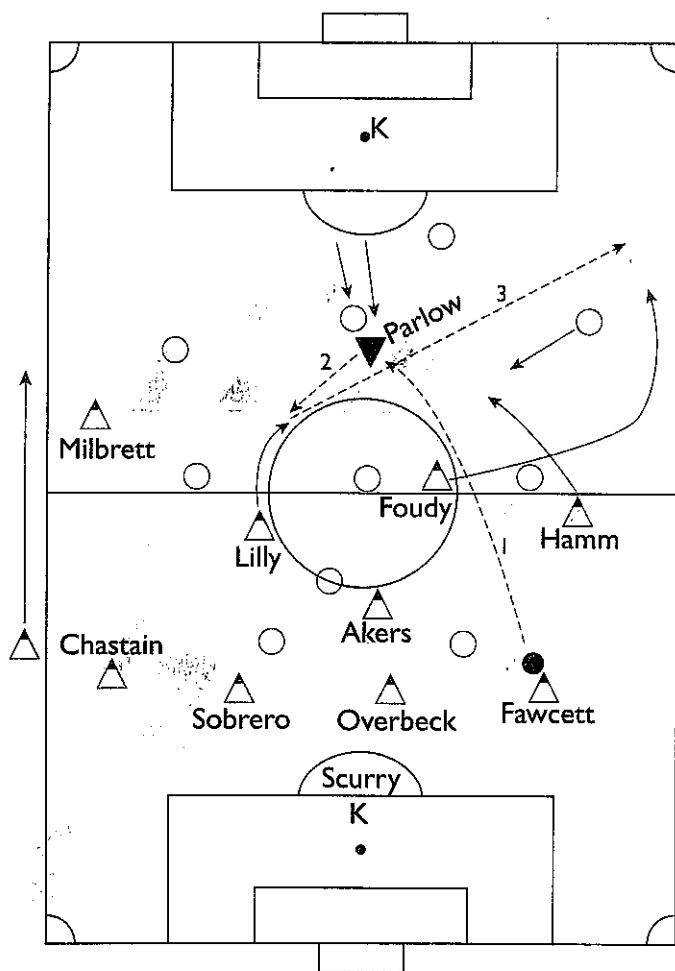


Diagram V — Creating width with possession in 4-3-3