

# **New leaders aim to boost girls soccer – By Mike Woitalla (from Soccer America’s Youth Soccer Insider)**

“You’re going to hear us shout from the top of every tall building: technique, technique, technique,”

The first ear-piercing wakeup call for U.S. women’s soccer came at the 2007 World Cup, where a dazzling Brazil outplayed and routed the USA, 4-0, in semifinals.

Last year provided more examples that the benefit of the USA’s huge head start in the girls and women’s game was evaporating. The USA lost to Mexico for the first time ever, and at the U-17 World Cup, it wasn’t the Americans being hailed for skillful, entertaining soccer — but South Korea, North Korea, Japan and Spain.

Tony DiCicco, coach of the 1999 World Cup-winning U.S. women, said, “On the girls’ side, our players are not smart players, they lack sophistication, they’re not technical enough” – and he blamed the youth soccer structure, which he referred to as a big business.

The U.S. Soccer Federation, which four years ago became ambitiously involved in the youth arena on the boys side with its launch of the U.S. Soccer Development Academy, and last spring appointed Claudio Reyna as Youth Soccer Technical Director, is now taking on the youth game on the girls’ side.

For the first time, U.S. Soccer has appointed full-time positions to oversee the women’s youth national team program and the programs’ overall development.

April Heinrichs, the former U.S. women’s national team captain and coach, was named Technical Director. Former UCLA women’s coach Jillian Ellis, who has also coached the U.S. U-21 women, is Development Director.

A key part of their task will be assessing the youth club environment. “We’ll go out and see exactly what is being done, then evaluating and getting feedback,” says Ellis.

But they already know what a key focus will be.

“You’re going to hear us shout from the top of every tall building: technique, technique, technique,” says Heinrichs.

Says Ellis, “We’ve all come to the agreement that technical development is the greatest need. The simple message is spend half of your practice doing technical work.”

That other nations would improve may have been inevitable. That they're producing more skillful teams than the USA — whose participation figures and investment in girls and women's soccer are unmatched — demonstrates that something had gone wrong somewhere at the American youth level.

Heinrichs starred on the U.S. team that won the inaugural Women's World Cup in 1991. And she coached the USA in 2000-2004, winning the gold medal at the 2004 Olympic Games.

"I think in the women's game we identified our great qualities and they became our strengths, going back to the 1980s and 1990s," she says. "And now some of our strengths have evolved into weaknesses that we want to address.

"We are tough psychologically, competitively, physically. When we got into a sticky situation we could default to the physical. We could default to the psychological.

"Now we need to default to a little more possession and control the tempo of the game. Sometimes we just need to hang on to the ball. And because of our lack of technical skills in some situations we can't."

As they evaluate the youth soccer landscape, another key issue is the number of games.

"I certainly think the volume is an issue," Ellis said. "You can play 80 games a year but it's not going to get you technically proficient. We'll look at the ratio of match play to training. You have to look at how many games our youth players are playing and at what level.

"There are enlightened people out there who are changing those. I think there are people who are recognizing that four games in two days are just too much. You definitely want to tap in and encourage that type of thinking."

Game and tournament overload was one of the issues that led U.S. Soccer to launch the Development Academy for boys.

"We need to get the training-to-game ratio correct," Heinrichs said. "We need to consider more festivals, where they come in and play two games."

The boys Academy's other charge was to influence the approach its member clubs took to the pre-Academy ages — de-emphasizing results at the young ages and emphasizing player development.

Whether the Federation should launch a similar program on the girls' side is something Ellis and Heinrichs will consider.

"We talked a little a bit since they've been appointed about the Academy on boys' side and the pros and cons of that," said U.S. Soccer President Sunil Gulati. "We're encouraged from what we've seen on the boys' side and certainly are looking seriously at the possibility on the girls' side and are open to that. We'll address that in the months to come."

(Mike Woitalla, the executive editor of Soccer America, coaches youth soccer for East Bay United in Oakland, Calif.)  
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