

Can Banyana rebrand the business of soccer?

 By [Dr Nikolaus Eberl](#)

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When the 2010 African Women Championships (AWC) kicked off on Sunday, 31 October 2010, at the Sinaba Stadium in Daveyton in front of a near capacity crowd, the big questions were whether the brand of South African soccer would be the real winner and whether the host team would be able to usher in a legacy in soccer development, similar to their US counterparts.

While the male version of the beautiful game has been suffering from hooliganism and low attendance figures in the PSL (an average of less than 7000 spectators per game) and has been rocked recently by bribery scandals revolving around the bidding for the hosting slots of the 2018 and 2022 FIFA World Cup hosting rights, women soccer has been establishing itself as a transformative sport that has done much for the advancement of gender equality in areas as far afield as Afghanistan and North Korea.

In an exclusive interview with the author, AWC chairperson Nomsa Mahlangu reveals the bigger picture of this tournament and what the future holds for the development of the female version of the beautiful game.

The world's fastest-growing sport

According to Mahlangu, women's soccer is currently the world's fastest-growing sport, with over 30 million registered players around the globe. The dynamic chairlady points out that the most recent Women's FIFA World Cup, hosted in China in 2007, firmly established the female version of the beautiful game as an eminent force in the international soccer arena.

Says Mahlangu, "The 2007 World Cup was, without a doubt, a tournament played at a high technical and tactical level. Women's soccer today is fairer than men's, offensive and well-played at a pace that has clearly sped up... And the nearly 40 000 spectators per game in China speak for themselves. While the 1999 Cup was broadcast in 67 countries, this time around it was 220."

According to Mahlangu, the world cup in China has given women's soccer a new worldwide impulse for further development. Speaking about the success of women's soccer across the globe, Mahlangu cites the US example of hosting the Women's World Cup in 1999 as a case in point: "Nowhere in the world has women's football been as successful as the US. Besides winning world titles and Olympic medals, American teams have transformed the game and its image.

"The US has also produced stars like Mia Hamm (the world's all-time leader, with a total of 158 goals - more than any other man or woman in history). Nike was so impressed with her that it named one of its campus buildings in her honour."

US women taking the lead

Remembers Mahlangu: "During the third Women's World Cup in 1999, 90 000 fans crammed into the Rose Bowl Stadium in Pasadena, California, for a thrilling final between the US and China, which the US won 5-4 on penalties. Following its success in hosting that world cup, the US launched its women's professional league in 2001 - and immediately began attracting crowds in excess of 20 000, prompting both England and Ireland to follow suit."

Soccer players agree with Mahlangu's enthusiastic views about the future of the feminine game.

Says US national team member Gat Reddick-Whitehill: "The legacy the 1999 team leaves is everything you see in women soccer. Everything you see is because of them - the youth club teams, the Olympic development teams, the different national teams."

Star striker Mia Hamm agrees: "The world cup brought people together that probably never thought they would be watching soccer, let alone women's soccer, just soccer... and how much pride they felt, whether it is women being women, or the pride they felt in seeing the United States doing what they did."

Blatter's vision for women's soccer

It was FIFA president Sepp Blatter who recently stated that the future of the beautiful game is feminine, and Mahlangu agrees full-heartedly: "Little is it known that, not so long ago, women's soccer was the favourite choice amongst English soccer fans.

"It was a full house on a remarkable Boxing Day in 1920 when 53 000 fans packed Goodison Park (home of Everton FC) to watch an English football team at their best.

"In fact, one player, Alice Stanley, recorded in her diary that another 15 000 supporters were turned away. Yet, amazingly, it was a women's football match."

The SA women's soccer team has come a long way since it was first assembled as a national squad in 1993.

Banyana's long road to glory

Banyana Banyana - "The Girls" - are now ranked third in Africa, pushed Nigeria to the brink at the 2003 All Africa Games, and came within one goal of qualifying for the 2004 Olympics. After a few years in the proverbial desert, when sponsors were scarce and team performance suffered as a result, Banyana came back to continental glory in 2008, when it reached the final of the African Championships, only to lose 1-2 to hosts Equatorial Guinea.

Women in SA have been playing club soccer for decades, albeit on a disjointed and local basis. There are currently more than 1200 women's soccer clubs in SA Football Association's 52 regions, with a pool of close to 100 000 players.

According to Mahlangu, the future of women's soccer in SA is bright, and in concluding, she quotes Julie Foudy, member of the winning 1999 US world cup team: "The country got very behind the event - it was amazing. We always said we could make a huge impact on the sport. If people just had a glimpse of what we were all about, we could reach so many kids to try soccer, to start playing it, to really get interested in the game."

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