

by Todd Tuell

NOT JUST FOR THE GUYS

According to her Web site, Carli Lloyd's goal is to become the FIFA Women's World Player of the Year.

CARLI LLOYD started out playing soccer when she was just 5 years old. Her first team was organized by her local recreation center in New Jersey, the Delran Athletic Association. That first day she ran onto the soccer field with other little boys and girls set her on a path to becoming a professional soccer player.

Lloyd plays for the Western New York Flash of the National Women's Soccer League and she is a center midfielder on the U.S. Women's National Team. In fact, she scored the game winning goals for the United States in both the 2008 and 2012 Olympic gold medal games.

Today, millions of kids run out onto the soccer field each spring and summer, starting even younger than Lloyd did. But soccer wasn't always so popular, especially with girls. In the 1970s, and even into the 1980s when Lloyd first started, it was rare for girls to play organized soccer.

According to the National Federation of State High School Associations, in 1970, 2,217 U.S. high schools had boys' soccer teams with nearly 50,000 participants, while not a single high school in the country had a girls' soccer program. By the next year, though, that started to change. In 1971, 28 girls' teams were launched with 700 female players around the country. Still, that paled in comparison to the nearly 80,000 boys playing that year, more than 100 times the number of girls.

Fast-forward 40 years to 2011, and those numbers are a bit closer. There are over 11,000 girls' high school soccer programs with more than 370,000 players. Those numbers are nearly equal to the number of boys' teams and participants. In addition to that, there are more than 3,000,000 youth soccer players with only slightly fewer than 50 percent females registered with the U.S. Youth Soccer organization.





Carli Lloyd races for the ball during a 2011 FIFA Women's World Cup quarterfinal match against Brazil.



BELOW Japan team players celebrate after defeating the United States to win the FIFA Women's World Cup final in 2011.



Part of the reason for such growth in popularity is that, throughout the world, soccer is an easy sport for young kids to participate in. “It’s not like other sports like golf or tennis that can be expensive,” Lloyd says. “Cleats, a ball, and a water bottle, and you’re set.”

There’s got to be more to it than that for girls to play from age 5 through high school at such high numbers. What happened in 1971 to launch the popularity of soccer with girls?

The answer: Opportunity. Before 1971, there were few high school or collegiate teams in any sport for girls, so there were few female role models for young girls to emulate. Then came Title IX in 1972, part of the Equal Opportunity in Education Act. When applied to athletics, it aims to ensure that no one is excluded from opportunities to participate on the basis of gender.

Kids develop an identity often by emulating heroes and role models. “Today you can turn on your television and catch soccer games everywhere,” notes Lloyd. “Not just MLS, but European soccer and the English Premier Leagues.” More and more girls across the United States and around the world now have the opportunity to follow other girls and women, like Lloyd (who has more than 104,000 Twitter followers @CarliLloyd), playing soccer as a career and representing their countries. They see girls and women proving themselves on the field, competing and succeeding. Just as with boys, Lloyd points out, “Young girls aspire to all of that.” So you see, soccer is NOT just for the guys. 🌍



ABOVE Many consider Mia Hamm the best female soccer player in history. She played on the U.S. national team for 17 years.

Today’s young players have lots of female role models to look up to.

