

Asian women's soccer teams show up male rivals

By John Duerden
AP Sports Writer

SEOUL, South Korea — The contrast between the fortunes of Asia's women's soccer teams and their male equivalents could not be more striking.

At last year's men's World Cup, none of the continent's four teams won a game and all finished bottom of their respective groups. At the 2015 female version, all five recorded a victory, with only Thailand failing to make it to the knockout stage.

Japan, the defending champion, took on the United States in the final in Vancouver, and other teams put in strong performances: South Korea defeated Spain in dramatic fashion to progress past the group stage for the first time in its history; a young China team narrowly lost 0-1 to the United States in the last eight; and Australia was a standout performer and was narrowly defeated 0-1 by Japan at the same quarterfinal stage.

Thailand, making its first World Cup appearance, defeated Ivory Coast 3-2 in one game.

Moya Dodd, a former vice president at the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) and member of the Executive Committee of Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) as well as ex-Australian international, said funding was key to the success.



"Asian women footballers have always done well, such as Taiwan in the '80s and China in the '90s," Dodd told The Associated Press. "But specifically for this edition, the AFC supported each of the five Asian qualifying teams with a \$200,000 preparation subsidy which enabled teams to have solid blocks of preparation. For example, Australia enjoyed almost five months of almost full-time preparation."

Tom Byer, a youth development expert and football consultant to the Chinese Ministry of Education, said Asian teams

have more belief in their capabilities in the women's game than in the men's.

"Japan winning the World Cup in 2011 gave Asian countries both hope and confidence that they can win and that they belong in these international competitions," said Byer.

The success is even more pronounced at the junior level. Of the four under-17 Women's World Cups held to date, three have been won by Asian teams: Japan, North Korea, and South Korea.

"There is now a belief that other Asian countries can compete at the highest level," Byer said. "China sent the youngest team to this World Cup hoping to build for the future."

In the men's game, Asian teams are often up against opponents who are bigger and faster, whereas the physical differences are not as pronounced in the

GIRL POWER. Team Japan's Shinobu Ohno (#11) dribbles the ball during a match at the Women's World Cup soccer tournament held in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. The contrast between the fortunes of Asia's women's soccer teams and their male equivalents could not be more striking. At last year's men's World Cup, none of the continent's four teams won a game and all finished bottom of their respective groups. At the 2015 female version, all five recorded a victory, with only Thailand failing to make it to the knockout stage. (AR Photo/Jan Landis)

women's game and the Asian focus upon tactical discipline and preparation comes to the fore.

"The level of discipline in Asia for both sports and academics is valued much more," Byer said. "The Asian kids in general practice and study more than western kids therefore they tend to be better technically. And at the older age groups, technical ability often trumps physical, more athletic ability."

It has also helped that there has been less competition to reach the summit of women's soccer, as some parts of the world have been slower to put funding into the female sport. While the men's professional game came east decades after it was established in Europe and South America, Asia has been an early adopter of the women's game.

"Many of the established world powers in men's football have been slow to take the opportunity in women's football," Dodd said.

"We are in for exciting times as more and more of the established 'old world' football nations realize the opportunity they are missing. Imagine a tournament that includes the likes of Italy, Portugal, and Argentina with well-resourced women's teams. That will challenge today's top-ranked teams to reach even greater heights."

Women's World Cup final seen by record 26.7 million in U.S.

NEW YORK (AP) — The U.S. win over Japan in the Women's World Cup final was the most viewed soccer game in the history of American television.

The 5-2 victory, which gave the Americans a record third title, was seen by 26.7 million viewers.

Fox said its English-language coverage drew a 12.9 rating and was seen by an average of 25.4 million, and NBC's Telemundo said its telecast averaged 1.27 million. The audience peaked at 30.9 million between 8:30pm and 8:45pm as the game neared its end, and 43.2 million tuned into some portion of the match.

Average viewership topped the previous mark of 26.5 million set when Germany beat Argentina in last year's men's World Cup final. That was seen by 17.3 million on ABC and 9.2 million on Spanish-language Univision.

Fox's viewership set a U.S. English-language record for soccer, topping the 18.22 million who tuned in to ESPN for the 2-2 draw between the American men and Portugal in the group stage on June 22 last year.

The previous high for a women's match was 17,975,000 on ABC for the U.S. win in penalty kicks over China in the 1999 Women's World Cup final.

Fox's viewership for this year's final in Vancouver, British Columbia, which started at 7:00pm EDT, was nearly double the 13,458,000 that watched Japan's penalty-kicks win over the United States in the 2011 final. That game, played in

Frankfurt, Germany, started at 2:45pm EDT.

Fox's audience for the final exceeded the viewers for San Francisco's win over Kansas City in Game 7 of last year's World Series on Fox (23.5 million), Golden State's NBA title-winning victory over Cleveland last month on ABC (23,254,000), and Chicago's Stanley-Cup-winning victory in Game 6 over Tampa Bay last month on NBC (8,005,000).

It was the highest for any U.S. broadcast since an average of 28.3 million saw Duke beat Wisconsin on CBS to win the NCAA men's basketball title in April.

The 52 World Cup matches on Fox, Fox Sports 1, and Fox Sports 2 averaged 1,824,000, a 21-percent increase from the average of 1,511,000 for the 32 games of the 2011 tournament on ESPN and ESPN2.

St. Louis had the highest average for the seven U.S. matches at 8.0, followed by Kansas City (7.5), Washington, D.C. (7.3), Austin, Texas (6.6), San Diego (6.4), Richmond, Virginia (6.2), and Denver and Baltimore (6.1).

An average of 232,000 unique streamers watched the final on Fox Sports Go, a record for the app.

In the other big soccer match the same weekend, Chile's penalty-kicks win over Argentina in the finale of the Copa America tournament was viewed by 1.46 million in the United States: 464,000 on beIN Sports and 1 million on beIN Sports en Espanol.

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