

More than just a game: Why girls soccer matters

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VANCOUVER—When the women's Olympic qualifying soccer tournament started Jan. 19 in the UFO-style BC Place, barely a mention was apparent.

Despite Vancouver's thousands of recreational soccer players, the qualifier brought just a quizzical nod and non-committal afterthought. Most people here had no idea Canada will host the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup.

Fast forward to the semi-final matches Friday — when the U.S. will clobber Costa Rica and our women take on Mexico with fingers crossed — and the mood has shifted, like a strong West Coast espresso jolt to the system.

With Sportsnet running all the matches, the local media agreeing to a bit of non-Canuck coverage and our team winning, bums in seats jumped to 12,000 from 7,000 by the time Canada played its second game.

People are starting to like this “girls” soccer thing. They love having a hometown star like Christine Sinclair who seems to score goals in her sleep. They love the glamour of Hope Solo whisking into town from her *Dancing with the Stars* gig. I've given Cheer 4 Canada presentations to thousands of students at 33 schools and I can tell you just as many kids love soccer as they do seeing celebrities flounder on stilettos.

Vancouver is buzzing with patriotic fever. It may not be 2010 again but fans are gallivanting in with their Canadian flags and all the red and white Olympic souvenirs they boxed up ages ago. Competing sombreros are everywhere and face paint is back. The stands are packed with kids, soccer families and guys (and many women) checking out the hotties. The Olympic qualifiers have become a must-see event.

So why does all this matter?

This is what I tell the kids I visit: When I was inducted as the first woman in the Canadian Soccer Hall of Fame over a decade ago, a reporter asked with a tone of disapproval: “Why, why would a *girl* want to play soccer?”

His incredulous attitude left me silent for a while. Finally I responded: “You know, your question is like asking me why a girl would like Italian food or Chinese food or chocolate cake or pizza, as if girls are born missing a chromosome and unable to appreciate the things in life that give us spice

and zest like running around with a ball, scoring goals or high-fiving friends and feeling good and fit in our bodies.”

The kids nod. They get it.

What I didn't articulate to them, I wrote in a blog: “Factor in all the statistics and global challenges you have ever read about the plight of girls and women, from economic neglect to teenage pregnancies, rape, genital mutilation, domestic abuse, limited educational opportunities and the absence of representation in political matters, and we are just scratching the surface of why sports and physical activity can make a difference.

“A girl who plays sports gains confidence in her body, she learns to connect and be empowered through her efforts with the people around her. She learns that she can accomplish goals, take on leadership roles and make healthy choices for herself that may help steer her away from abusing alcohol, drugs, cigarettes and participating in gangs or crime. She may make stronger relationship decisions and become a positive role model for her children.

“Women athletes can be fantastic employees or business owners because they understand the values that drive sports: commitment, integrity, cooperation and overcoming adversity. Given the intrinsic zest stimulated in their bodies from playing and having fun, they are more likely to be creative, intelligent, appreciate the environment and make wiser dietary choices because they are in tune with themselves.

“Quite frankly, they look a heck of a lot better than the majority of the population that has dozed off on the couch with a bag of Doritos. They don't need to read as many books searching for happiness because they ARE happy. And besides the odd broken bone, bruise or sprain, they are mentally tougher, they probably cost the health care industry bundles less, and they are just as sexy as the Beckhams and Ronaldos we all pay millions to see.”

Every night, I have been billy goating around BC Place interviewing players and fans on “why the World Cup matters, why it's important that girls play sports.” The question seems incomprehensible now, as if I were to ask why a girl would like pizza.

People in the stands aren't pondering such thoughts. They're here to cheer on their country and watch amazing role models — those we all know and the ones we don't, like the Haitian women who have overcome hell on earth to wear cleats and a uniform in our land.

And for girls in the stands, their lives have shifted. They have been awakened. Whatever dormant dream might be whispering to them, they will have a newfound belief that their hopes are possible.

I am sure that a future Canadian star — whether she is 5, 6, 10 years old — will walk through the gates of BC Place this week and her life will be saved. I've asked many women, even national

players from most of the countries, if soccer saved their life. They think about it and they nod. They know.

This is why girls soccer matters.

Carrie Serwetnyk is a former national player originally from Hamilton and now the publisher of FreeKick magazine.