



To score, or not to score? Sex, WAGs and the World Cup

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Russian model Irina Shayk is sure to turn heads off the pitch ... but will boyfriend and Portuguese striker Cristiano Ronaldo be able to keep his mind on the game? EPA/Walter Bieri

While watching their national teams play in the World Cup, spectators may have their attention drawn away from the “beautiful game” on the pitch to the beautiful people off the pitch – the footballers’ wives and girlfriends (WAGs).

And while they might provide viewers with a welcome distraction from a nil-all draw, we might ask: do they distract the footballers too?

It would appear so. Over the past month or so, several national teams have put forth their policies surrounding sex during the 2014 World Cup:

- Mexico, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Chile have prohibited sex during the tournament
- English players are allowed to fly their families over as long as they fit in the team’s training schedule but captain Steven Gerrard is leaving his family at home
- Brazil and Mexico warn against overly frisky “acrobatics”
- Spain demands no funny business the night before matches, only on days off.

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Australia, France and the US are all allowing a bit of action during the competition, to varying degrees.

So why all this fuss over sex before sport? We've covered this topic before, so let's look specifically at the World Cup here.

English football agonises over its national team. The two principal competitions it enters – the European Championships and the World Cup – are perennial disasters.

Each failure is marked by mishap. In recent decades, players have been sent from the field, suspended, robbed by refereeing, missed penalty kicks and cheated by Diego Maradona's epic first goal in the quarter finals of the 1986 World Cup – the hand of God.

La mano de Dios (along with some impressive commentary).

The 2006 World Cup finals in Germany offered a new explanation. The press constructed players' WAGs as distractions from their partners' mission: triumph on the pitch.

Shopping, sex and celebrity sent the national team askew. Why?

Sexual conquests (and losses)

With the emergence of sexology and internationally competitive sport in the 20th century came scientific claims about sex and performance.

Cyclists and swimmers ingested liquid extracts from bull testicles a century ago, and the last English FA Cup Final before World War II was allegedly decided on the strength of which team took monkey gland tablets in training (the losers).



You want my what now? Michael Ransburg/Flickr, CC BY-NC-ND

Today's story is a blend of mysticism, media gossip and minor scholarship. Indian wrestling requires men to forgo sex to capitalise on the semen they produce.

There are loads of great sporting achievements that followed nights of denial:

- Khalid Khannouchi's marathons
- Muhammad Ali's fights
- the 1996 Canadian Olympic swim team
- Mike Ditka's Chicago Bears
- John Elway's Super Bowl victories
- Carl Frosch's knockouts.

These are contrasted with great performances that come hard on the heels of nocturnal indulgence:

- Wilt Chamberlain's hundred-point basketball game
- Bob Beamon's Olympic long jump
- Brazil's 1994 World Cup victory
- Kerrin-Lee Gartner's Olympic skiing gold
- Marty Liquori's mile record
- Joe Namath's Super Bowl success.

Consider the mythology that swirls around the 1974 World Cup final between the Netherlands and the then Federal Republic of Germany.

The Dutch were supposedly instructed to have sex the night before. Having scored in the first minute (so to speak) they flagged. The Germans, ordered to abstain, triumphed, courtesy of two late goals.

So the myth continues. The scientific evidence is sparse. This obsession stems from history and culture.

The WAG shadow looms

Sex and sport have a lengthy shared past. In Ancient Greece and Rome, the capacity to channel desire into athletics proved men's fitness to rule society.

The capacity of sport to incarnate such masculine hegemony is being destabilised as more women become spectators, journalists and athletes. Over the past 20 years, sports have sought them out as consumers, and increasing numbers participate as athletes.

But the political economy of women's spectatorship is not matched by the political economy of women's sport. Media attention and gossip consign elite sportswomen to a different sphere from elite men. And as spectators, their expertise and commitment are rarely foregrounded or respected.



Was it fair to point the finger at the WAGs – such as Coleen Rooney (showing off her manicure) and Victoria Beckham – for England's poor performance at the 2006 World Cup? EPA/Peter Kneffel

So among hundreds of media stories that fetishise WAGs (no one at the World Cup is overtly queer), their bodies and romantic histories, the Daily Star's guide for them at the Cup highlights "selfies, shop-

ping and skinny mojitos”.

Meanwhile, Fara Williams, one of England’s most-capped and greatest footballers – and still playing – last month acknowledged that she lived homeless for much of her international career.

Thank heavens for the Glasgow Evening Times’ critique of the WAGs route to affluence as opposed to seeking a profession or trade.

Clearly, as long as women are routinely valued for their looks and the men they accompany, and conventionally devalued for their other qualities, the WAGs charade will come around every four years.

One thing seems likely: the World Cup will once again end in tears for England – perhaps private, orgasmic ones, alone or in company.

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