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## Kicking Off

By MICHAEL SOKOLOVE

LATE IN THE SECOND HALF of a World Cup semifinal match against the United States in 2007, Marta Vieira da Silva, a Brazilian who is the best player in women's soccer — and perhaps the most electrifying performer in the game, male or female — caught up to a pass and controlled it about 20 yards from the American goal. The crowd inside the stadium in the Chinese city Hangzhou roared, as soccer fans do any time Marta is near the ball, even when she has no obvious path forward. With her back to the goal and a defender pressing her, Marta lifted the ball into the air with her right foot, then poked it with her left heel past the U.S. player, who responded by haplessly trying to grab her uniform. Marta pirouetted on by — almost literally running a circle around her opponent — dribbled around another defender (who stumbled and nearly fell) and shot the ball past the goalkeeper.

“It’s what she does — she confuses you,” [Brandi Chastain](#), a former star on the U.S. national team, told me. “You don’t know whether to chase her or the ball.” Earlier in the same game, Marta scored another goal after weaving through no fewer than six defenders. “Most players, when they’re under pressure from more than one defender, look to get rid of the ball as fast as they can,” Chastain said, adding that Marta “sees it as an opportunity to make something fabulous happen.”

In each of the last three years, Marta, who is just 23, was named the female player of the year by FIFA, the world governing body of soccer. (Like many other Brazilian athletes, she goes by her first name.) She is the only woman to have placed a footprint alongside those of Pelé and other greats outside the famed Estádio do Maracanã in Rio de Janeiro. For the last five seasons she has played for a top team in Sweden, but early this year, she moved to Southern California to join the new Women’s Professional Soccer league, which began play last week. (Marta’s team, the Los Angeles Sol, plays the New York-area franchise, Sky Blue F.C., at the TD Bank Ballpark in Bridgewater, N.J., today.) In the game programs, Marta will be listed as a forward, a prosaic term that hardly seems to do justice to her speed, determination and creativity. Better to think of her as an escape artist — both on the field and in the arc of her life.

In late February, Marta joined players selected from each of the seven teams to model their new uniforms in New York. She walked down a runway at an events space in Chelsea, wearing the blue home jersey of the Los Angeles Sol, smiling shyly and looking as if she would have been a lot more comfortable with a ball at her feet. The next morning, she told me how, in a span of just a half-dozen years, she made the journey out of her remote town in the northeast of [Brazil](#), where few girls even played soccer, to the pinnacle of her sport. “I had to do all of it by myself,” she said through a Portuguese interpreter. (She speaks Swedish fluently and, according to her new teammates, is rapidly picking up English.) “There wasn’t anybody for me to follow, or anyone to say to me, These are the steps you must take. First of all, I was almost always the only girl playing with boys in a small town. Some boys accepted me, some didn’t. And my family had comments made to them. Brazil is still a very macho society, and sports are mainly for boys, so people would say to them: What is this girl doing? Why is she always out there in the soccer games with the boys?”

Marta grew up in Dois Riachos (which means “two little rivers”), a town of about 13,000, as the youngest of four children. Her father left the family not long after her birth, and she has no memory of him. Her mother worked for the local government. There was no organized soccer for girls, so at the age of 10 she joined the boys’ team at her school. “But even the boys’ league was not that structured,” Marta said. “We trained a couple of times a week, but otherwise, we played on our own.”

She played soccer on the town’s narrow streets or in local parks and other open spaces, usually pickup games involving just a handful of players. Because Dois Riachos is in an arid region, some of the bigger games were played on sandy river bottoms, which are dry for all but a couple of months a year.

Soccer is a sport open to those of small stature, but even by her game’s standards, Marta is short and slight compared with most of the other top women players. She is officially listed at 5-foot-4 (which seems charitable by at least an inch) and weighs about 120 pounds. Her feet are the tiniest I have ever seen on any elite adult athlete except a female gymnast — she wears size 4½ soccer shoes. When she was 14, an older cousin, a man who was a good local player himself, told her that he had a friend in Rio de Janeiro who knew someone connected to one of the top club teams for girls — a team that operated as a sort of feeder program for the Brazilian women’s national team. He thought he could get her a tryout.

“That was my dream,” Marta said. “So I had no hesitation about saying yes. I didn’t know there was such a thing as professional soccer, but I knew that Brazil had a women’s team that competed against other countries, and I wanted to be on that team.”

She took a bus to Rio, where she stayed with family friends for four days, waiting for her audition. I asked how long the bus ride took. “Three days,” she said, matter of factly. “We slept on the bus. It made stops for us to eat, and there were also places we could get off and take a shower.”

As far as she knew, no one outside her town had heard of her soccer abilities. If she hadn’t shown up in Rio, no one would have asked why Marta wasn’t being evaluated. “There’s not much structure for girls’ soccer except maybe in Rio and São Paulo,” she explained. “If you know where to go, they’ll give you a chance, and you either make it or you don’t.”

The tryout was just one day. “If I had not made the team,” she said, “I would have had to go home.” But she did make it and has never gone home to live, only returning to Dois Riachos for short visits. She stopped going to high school after she was elevated to a high-level team that played abroad frequently. “By now, I’ve lived in many places,” she told me. “I feel like the world is educating me.”

IT HAS BEEN ALMOST A DECADE since the U.S. women’s soccer team defeated China in the finals of the 1999 World Cup, prevailing on penalty kicks after a full game and two overtime periods of tense, scoreless play. The riveting competition, witnessed by more than 90,000 spectators at the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, Calif., with another 40 million viewers in the United States watching on television, came at the end of a long tournament, but it seemed like the beginning of something — a new era in which more Americans might accept elite women’s sport as entertainment and more of the best female athletes might be able to earn livelihoods as professionals.

The Women’s United Soccer Association, a league founded six months after that championship game, prominently featured Chastain, [Mia Hamm](#), Julie Foudy, Kristine Lilly and the rest of the skilled, charismatic

women of the championship U.S. squad. The first games were played in April 2001, but the league folded after losing an estimated \$100 million in just three seasons — a terrible letdown for advocates of women's sports and for the players themselves. W.P.S. is doing things differently. It will, first off, be smaller in scale (a strategy chosen long before the economy's downturn). Most of the games will take place in small facilities, some seating as few as 5,000 fans, rather than in big football stadiums. Players will make an average of about \$32,000 for the six-month season, although some U.S. national-team members and top international players — Marta, most notably — will earn considerably more. Tickets will cost as little as \$10 a game.

The W.U.S.A. sometimes seemed as much a cause as a business venture, and in that regard, too, the new league has learned a lesson. It will not market virtue, at least not overtly. "I believe what we are doing in this league will serve the cause of women and women's sports," Rachel Epstein, the league's marketing director, told me. "But it's not why we're doing it, and we have not come close to that as a pillar of our brand and don't really have to. That pioneering spirit — we already own it. It's inherent."

Epstein said the phrase that W.P.S. league marketers want to associate with is "world class," signifying that its athletes are elite by any measure, and should not be viewed just through the prism of women's sports. Her model is professional tennis: she said she found research indicating that 80 percent of the fans of male tennis are also fans of the women's game. Of course, to convincingly sell the league as world class, the league needed Marta, and it was not easy to get her. She had to be persuaded that the world's best women players were congregating in the U.S. — with a handful of exceptions, they are — and had to be induced to leave her home in Umea, a center of education and research in the north of Sweden, closer to the Arctic Circle than to Stockholm.

Her Brazil-based agent, Fabiano Farah, represents some of the world's best players, including Ronaldo, a longtime star on the Brazilian men's team. "I'm sure a lot of people thought it was obvious she would want to come to the U.S.," he told me. "But she played for a strong team and had a life she loved."

Farah wanted her placed in Los Angeles, where the W.P.S. franchise is owned in part by the giant entertainment-and-sports conglomerate AEG, which has a stake in dozens of teams and sports facilities around the world. The Sol practices and will play its home games at the AEG-owned Home Depot Center in Carson, Calif., a sprawling complex that exists as a sort of parallel universe within the United States, where professional soccer matters deeply. It is home to two teams in men's [Major League Soccer](#) — Chivas USA and the L.A. Galaxy (which [David Beckham](#) is expected to return to in July, after a stint with A.C. Milan) — and serves as the main training site for the U.S. men's and women's national teams.

Neither the Sol nor Marta's agent will comment on her compensation, which published reports put as high as \$1.5 million over three years. All Farah would say is that he wanted her to be in a "big consumer market" and that "she only decided to leave Sweden after I could say to her, 'Marta, this is real.'"

WHEN MARTA BEGAN TRAINING with the Sol in Carson early last month, she was far from the only world-class player on the field. Her new teammates included Aly Wagner and Stephanie Cox, veterans of U.S. national teams; the international stars Han Duan of China and Aya Miyama of Japan; and numerous top players from the U.S. collegiate ranks. But Marta moved differently. She glided — with speed. When she ran sprints over a series of hurdles, the Sol coach, Abner Rogers, looked on with his assistants and laughed. "I don't think she knew why we were laughing," he said, "but it was out of amazement. She got her knees so high. Her form was so perfect and she was so fast, it was just extraordinary to see."

It was with the ball, though, that Marta really stood out. Every part of her body seems trained to touch it — stop it, spin it, push it through some small space or set it up, just so, to blast it by a goalkeeper.

In U.S. soccer circles, there is an ongoing discussion about how American players, from a young age, are overcoached and coddled. They practice only under a coach's supervision, and games take place as parents hover with lovingly cut orange slices and juice boxes. The selection of talent for top U.S. teams, from the youth level all the way up to the senior national squads, tends to emphasize speed, strength and aggression over great technical skill or improvisational ability. Marta will present a strong visual image of what can happen with less coaching and a childhood spent learning to pick up the bounces and spin of a soccer ball on nearly every imaginable surface except a groomed field.

Charlie Naimo, the Sol general manager, is eager for his star to be an ambassador for a new style of play — and perhaps new ways of thinking. “What we're hoping,” he said, “is that having Marta here and people watching her play is going to pose the question: Why? Why is she who she is? Well, it's kind of obvious. When she was 5 years old, she was out on the street all day playing.”

Mia Hamm's silhouette graces the official logo of W.P.S., and comparisons between the revered U.S. star, now retired, and Marta, are inevitable. Chastain, who at 40 is playing for San Jose in the new league, said: “Mia was the greatest goal scorer in the world. Marta is a great goal scorer, too. But I don't think that's what possesses her as a soccer player. What possesses her is her relationship with the ball, the way she can say to you, ‘I'm going to face you up and scare you.’”

Marta is also, clearly, accustomed to being a star. Team personnel tend to buzz around her, in case she has any needs. She has been driving on the L.A. freeways — “I drove in Rio,” she told me, “and that's crazy, so why not here?” — but when she felt she needed help negotiating the supermarket on a Sunday, she called someone at the Sol for assistance. About a third of her team lives together in a big house in Beverly Hills, but Marta is sharing a two-bedroom apartment in Redondo Beach, overlooking the Pacific, with Johanna Frisk, a teammate from Sweden who was signed by the Sol.

Marta and I talked one day after one of her practices in Carson. I had been thinking about her three-day bus ride from Dois Riachos to Rio, and just in general about a girl who leaves home at 14 to pursue a dream and never returns. I asked if she found any of it frightening, a question she seemed to find surprising. “Why would I be scared?” she said. “It was in my character to want to achieve my goal, and that was where my goal was. So I had to go there.”

*Michael Sokolove is a contributing writer for the magazine. His most recent book is “Warrior Girls,” about the injury epidemic in girls' sports.*

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