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SOCCER

SOCCER; U.S. Women Beat Norway To Capture World Cup

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GUANGZHOU, China, Nov. 30— America won its first international soccer championship tonight when the United States defeated Norway, 2-1, to take the first World Cup trophy for women.

At the end of the game, 12 Chinese motorcyclists carrying the flags of the tournament's 12 competing nations zoomed onto the field, and a float draped in tinsel and flashing lights with a model of the trophy set in a lotus flower was moved to the center of the field.

Amid a huge shower of fireworks, with a Chinese pop song blaring from stadium loudspeakers, the 18 jubilant Americans received their championship medals and big bouquets of flowers, as friends and parents in the stands cheered hoarsely and waved small American flags.

A crowd of 65,000 Chinese packed Tianhe Stadium in this sprawling southern China city for the final, cheering both teams and even trying to perfect the wave. They saw an evenly played first half, in which each side scored one goal. But the Norwegians largely controlled the second half, preventing the United States from scoring its second goal until two minutes before the end of the game. Both United States goals were scored by Michelle Akers-Stahl, the team's powerful, determined forward from Oviedo, Fla.

"Even though the Norwegians were controlling the ball for the last half of the game, I just knew somehow we would score," said Akers-Stahl, who stole a weak pass back to the Norwegian goalie by defender Tina Svensson -- an incredible lapse for a world-class player -- dodged around goalie Reidun Seth and pushed the game-winner into the net.

United States Coach Anson Dorrance conceded that Norway had outplayed his team in the second half. "Norway had the run of play and we got the break," he said. "I consider my team an excited but certainly very lucky world champion." But Dorrance added, "I feel what we've done here is proof to the world we are a developing soccer nation." **U.S. Dominates Tournament**

The women's team is already fully developed: The Americans were unbeaten in six games during the two-week tournament, outscoring opponents by 25-5.

Akers-Stahl, their most potent scorer, had 10 goals.

On the bus ride from the stadium, team members passed around the FIFA trophy and savored their victory to the theme music from the movie "Working Girl," a story about a talented secretary who rises in the male-dominated business world. If the United States team is Cinderella after she was fitted with the glass slipper, women's soccer remains Cinderella before. Despite impressive growth, the women's game does not begin to command the respect and rabid interest that men's soccer enjoys.

A relatively new competitive sport, women's soccer dates back only to the 1970's, both in the United States and Europe. FIFA, soccer's international governing body, has men's teams in 165 countries; 65 of those countries now have a women's soccer team, with countries joining those ranks each year.

"Men's soccer is an Olympic competition, but the international committee says women's soccer doesn't have a big enough world impact," said Akers-Stahl, who noted that many here hoped that the success of this first world championships would influence the International Olympic Committee to consider including women's soccer in the Olympics.

"Hopefully this world championship will put some stars in their eyes," said Akers-Stahl.

Scores of Chinese reporters dutifully covered every game here, with television sometimes airing two hours of game highlights and player interviews.

But officials believe the sport received a real boost from the foreign television crews who have beamed highlights and live and tape-delayed games to more than 100 countries.

"People around the world have gotten a glimpse of women's football," said Andreas Herren, a spokesman for FIFA, "and they can see that it is has all the excitement and emotion and joy the men's game has."

But before the tournament, even some soccer insiders admitted to only tepid attention in the women's game. "I was not very interested in the women's sport," one FIFA official confessed before he attended the tournament. "But these women play an amazing game. I was very impressed."

With America selected to serve as host for the men's World Cup finals in 1994, and with its women's team now officially the best in the world, United States soccer officials and players hope the sport will receive more publicity and attention, drawing more sponsorship money to expand league structures and train more top players and coaches, men and women.

"We are not a soccer culture in the United States," said Mary Harvey, the goalkeeper from Los Altos, Calif. "We have an inferiority complex, but now we can say we have a team that is the best in the world. It's a shot in the arm for soccer in America, for men, women, youth teams, all of us."

The United States Soccer Federation says that of the 6 million juniors playing in the country's soccer leagues, 40 percent are female. It is for them that the achievement of the Americans in China may really make a difference, suggested Akers-Stahl.

"Girls in the United States can now see women playing a high level of soccer," said Akers-Stahl, "and they can realize 'Hey, there is a national team, and it's the best in the world.' "

Photo: Michelle Akers-Stahl, center, celebrating with Julie Foudy, left, and Carin Jennings after the U.S. defeated Norway, 2-1, in the final of the women's soccer world championship in China yesterday. (Agence France-Presse)