

World Beater

Michelle Akers, soccer's top female, is ready to lead the U.S. to another title

by Kelly Whiteside

U.S. national team forward Michelle Akers has been called "the Michael Jordan of women's soccer." Her status was helped by a rabid soccer fan, one probably haven't heard of her. The best female player in the world was known as Michelle Akers-Stahl when she was married. Does that name ring a bell? "Once a P.A. announcer at a game introduced her as Michelle Aerosol," says Julie Foudy, a midfielder on the U.S. team. "Another time I was at a camp and someone said, 'Oh, you play with that girl ... um ... Michelle Anchor-Steam!' Yeah, right, Mich is a beer."

Maybe you would recognize the hair. With her unruly mane of curls, Akers is the Alexi Lalas of women's soccer. And at 5'10" she is several inches taller than most of her ponytailed teammates.

When Akers flew back from the inaugural Women's World Cup, held in China in 1991, a little old lady sitting next to her on the plane asked where Akers had been. She explained that she had just played in the world championship soccer tournament.

"How'd you do?" the woman asked.



"She's been there for three of her four games and that's the only one."

By the time of the first Women's World Cup in 1991, Akers was a proven high-impact player. Most of the players who made up the 1991 team had never set eyes on Akers until the game began following in the U.S. in the 1970s, when she was one of the best players in the world.

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Akers' stellar play in 1991 gave the U.S. team its first world championship since 1862. Doug Pensinger/Allsport

by Kelly Whiteside

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U.S. national team forward Michelle Akers has been called "the Michael Jordan of women's soccer," but unless you happen to be a rabid soccer fan, you probably haven't heard of her. The best female player in the world was known as Michelle Akers-Stahl when she was married. Does that name ring a bell? "Once a P.A. announcer at a game introduced her as Michelle Aerosol," says Julie Foudy, a midfielder on the U.S. team. "Another time I was at a camp and someone said, 'Oh, you play with that girl ... um ... Michelle Anchor-Steam!' Yeah, right, Mich is a beer."

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"How'd you do?" the woman asked.

"We won."

"That's nice," the woman said.

The win was more than just nice. The 2-1 victory over Norway in the final gave U.S. soccer its first world championship since 1862, when the first team was organized in the U.S. Whereas the U.S. men's team has struggled for the past century merely to be competitive in most international games, the women's team became a power soon after the women's game went worldwide in the mid-1980s.

Akers laughs at the memory of the U.S. team's first overseas trip, to a tournament in Italy in 1985. At the time she was a sophomore at Central Florida. "We didn't look like a national team," she says. "All we had were these lime-green and purple uniforms. No one was fit. It just felt like we were off to Italy on a vacation. We were just a bunch of kids, we didn't know what we were getting into." That team lost three of its four games and tied the other.

By the time of the first Women's World Cup six years later, America's team had changed dramatically. Most of the players who made up the 1991 side had taken up soccer when the game began booming in the U.S., in the 1970s, which was just about the same time European girls began playing their continent's favorite sport. That team, drawn from the first generation of U.S. women players, developed into an offensive powerhouse, led by Akers.

Now there are players on the national team who, as they were growing up, dreamed of being like Mich. "In high school our coach showed us tapes of the 1991 World Cup," says starting U.S. midfielder Tiffany Roberts, who recently turned 18. "She was the best player I had ever seen. I was in awe."

Since the World Cup, Akers's life has been turned upside down. For the past four years she has battled chronic Epstein-Barr virus, which causes incapacitating fatigue and a host of other debilitating symptoms, and in January she also went through a divorce. But amid such traumatic events, one thing has remained constant: Akers's status as the best woman player in the world. And though she has performed sparingly--but still brilliantly--for the U.S. team the past several years because of her illness, the 29-year-old Akers seems ready to again go full bore, just in time for America's defense of its title in the second World Cup tournament, which begins on June 6 in Sweden.

"The way she has progressed, we're expecting her to peak in Sweden," says U.S. coach Tony DiCicco, whose team is a strong favorite to win. "If she peaks, we'll peak with her." Akers is renowned for her Ruthian shots on goal. "They feel like cannonballs when you catch them," says DiCicco, who was a goalkeeper in the now defunct American Soccer League. According to U.S. forward Mia Hamm, a typical Akers goal unfolds like this: "Usually she draws a crowd of defenders around her, and when she gets the ball, she turns and gets hit, then she turns again and gets hit again, then she claws her way through

the pack, calms herself for the shot--she's so composed and focused at a time of so much panic--and strikes the ball perfectly."

When a game is on the line, Akers has the poise of Joe Montana. During the World Cup title game in 1991, with less than three minutes to play, the score tied 1-1 and 65,000 fans screaming, Akers pursued a long, high pass that landed on Norway's 18-yard line. But a defender got to the ball first and passed it back toward the Norwegian goalkeeper. Akers gave the defender a shove, and the defender fell into a teammate, taking them both out of the play. Akers intercepted the back pass, pushed the ball to the left of the onrushing goalie and stroked home the Cup-clinching score.

Akers has scored 82 goals in 87 international games, a ratio believed to be un-matched in women's or men's competition. (By comparison, the U.S. men's alltime leading scorer, Bruce Murray, had 21 goals in 93 international appearances.) Given her limited playing time in the 37 international matches she has participated in since becoming ill, it's hard to believe she averages nearly a goal a game. Imagine Michael Jordan leading the NBA in scoring while playing only 24 minutes a game.

As soon as Akers started feeling the symptoms of the illness upon her return from the last World Cup, her minutes on the field had to be conserved like water during a drought.

Before each game she would bargain with DiCicco, hoping to increase the number of minutes she would play before he took her out. A typical pregame conversation went as follows:

Akers: "How many minutes will I play?"

DiCicco: "Forty-five."

"No, give me 90."

"O.K., 60 minutes."

"Seventy-five."

"Seventy."

Though her body told her she needed to slow down, Akers not only pushed for more playing time but also continued her rigorous training regimen. "Of all people to get this Epstein-Barr virus, she's the worst," says Foudy. "She's a trainaholic."

Akers was stubborn enough to believe she could beat the illness, beat it just as she might slip past two defenders who stood in her path to the goal. She would give Epstein a shove, Epstein would fall into Barr, taking them both out of the play.

Her most agonizing bout with the illness occurred over a seven-month period last spring and summer. "Every day I felt as if I had just flown to Europe, not gotten any sleep or anything to eat, gotten right back on the plane, flown to the U.S. and then trained," Akers says. "When it was bad, I couldn't sit up in a chair. All I could do was lie in bed. At night I sweated so much I went through two or three T-shirts. And the migraine headaches pounded. Boom! Boom! Boom!" And those were just the bad days. On a really bad day, an entire percussion section played in her cranium.

Being on the road with the national team last summer became increasingly difficult for Akers. After any short flight she felt as if she had just circumnavigated the globe in a puddle jumper. There was a vacant expression in her eyes during team meetings. "I feel cloudy today," she would tell trainer Patty Marchak on days she was unable to get out of bed for practice. The postgame trip to the shower was a major expedition, brushing her teeth required extra effort, finding the energy to eat with the team was a struggle. "It was hard just to be friendly," Akers says. Certainly this wasn't the same good-natured soul her teammates knew, the one who laughed long and loud, especially if the joke was on her. "But on the field she still was the same dominating player," says Foudy. "She just couldn't go 90 minutes. It was a factor of time, how long she could play and not be wiped out for the next game."

Akers usually went 20 to 40 minutes a game. She would pick her moments to make runs and conserve her energy by hanging high on the opposing team's sweeper instead of running back to help out her teammates on defense. At times she thought about getting a plane ticket and going home. "It was an awful feeling, knowing before a game started that I'd be sick for the next two days," she says. But she stayed with the team because the CONCACAF Qualifying Championship, the World Cup qualifying tournament for teams from North and Central America and the Caribbean, was to be held in Montreal in August. "My challenge was to help us win, whether or not I was playing," Akers says. Somehow defying logic, medicine and all odds, she scored six goals in four games and was named MVP of the tournament, which the U.S. won.

At the end of the tournament she was a physical and emotional wreck. That same week, she and her husband, who was with her in Montreal, decided to get a divorce. Akers and Stahl met in 1989, were engaged within six weeks and married in a year. That April, following their honeymoon, she left their home in Florida to play for her semipro club team, Tyreso, in Sweden. The World Cup awaited the following year. "I fell into a fantasy world--a quick engagement, a house, a wedding, a World Cup. It all happened too fast," she says.

Of the failure of her marriage, she says, "I had been unhappy for a while. I was so sick that I didn't have the energy to waste on faking it anymore. That's one of the reasons why I made the decision to divorce in August. It was the hardest decision I've ever had to make in my life. Roby and I weren't good for each other, but I tend to think I can get through anything. Having my health compromised made me make choices. It took Epstein-Barr to knock me on my ass and get me going in the right direction again." The divorce was the first step of Akers's comeback. Soccer had consumed her life, and it had been the focal point of her marriage. Everything else--her relationships with her family, her friends and her religion--had been relegated to the sidelines. Akers started to rebuild those relationships. Attending services at a local church helped change her perspective. "I don't know how to explain it without sounding syrupy," she says, "but Christianity became my strength; it gave me peace of mind."

The second step involved Steve Slain, the U.S. team's massage therapist and strength coach, who became Akers's personal trainer/personal drill sergeant/personal watchdog last August. Getting Akers to stop pushing herself was a Sisyphean task. When Akers would overdo it, Slain would give her what she calls the "you-stupid-jerk look." Once in a while Akers would sneak in an extra training session, but Slain would always find out. Then the stupid-jerk look would become a you-complete-idiot scowl.

Though Akers was feeling better, she doubted she would be able to play in the World Cup. "The whole fall I thought, If I'm only running for five minutes a day, there is no way I can play for 90 minutes in the most demanding tournament in soccer," she says. "Now there are bad days instead of bad months." The best player in the world will make it to her sport's Super Bowl. There is optimism in her voice and a wide smile on her face; she hasn't felt this good in a long time.

Before a recent Friday-night game against Canada at a Dallas high school, there was no bargaining for minutes. Akers would play 90 minutes if her body told her it was O.K. As it turned out, she scored two goals in the first half, both on penalty kicks, and didn't return to the lineup after intermission. "I took myself out because I was feeling lethargic," she says. "Why push it right before it really counts? See, I'm learning to listen to my body." Long after the end of the game, a 9-1 win for the U.S., there were still a hundred or so fans behind a chain-link fence, screaming for Akers. The Friday-night lights seemed to shine only on her. She laughed and mugged for cameras and scribbled an autograph that looked like a violent seismograph reading. She was having fun again. Most of the fans were boys and girls, some of whom no doubt dream of being the Michelle Akers of their sport someday. She signed T-shirts, flags, posters, programs, even a kid's forehead. It looked like she might stay out there all night, autographing with moonbeams as her only light, but soon a team manager interceded and told the crowd that their idol had to go. "See you in Sweden," Akers said. And then she waved goodbye.