

It is now August 2007 and the Women's World Cup begins on Sept 10, 2007. I of course have absolutely no influence who will referee any match but that doesn't stop me from having an opinion. In the group with the USA is Nigeria and the match between them is likely to be very difficult to control. There are 10 referees who are not Americans and one of them will be selected. It needs to be a good choice.

The other teams in the group include Sweden and North Korea. The whole group could be a refereeing nightmare if not handled properly. Sweden and the USA play often and this match will probably be the least difficult but certainly not easy. The last friendly wasn't too friendly so top quality referees will be needed on every match.

The match that seems particularly tough is Nigeria v the USA. The USA played Nigeria in both 1999 and 2003 no doubt to the dismay of both teams.

That is bad luck all around. Nigeria is not a particularly good team losing both times by several goals. They make up for the lack of skill with intimidating sometimes brutal physical play. Particularly in 1999 Nigeria on several occasions was clearly out to hurt people. Mia Hamm took as bad a beating as I have ever seen a player take. She is as tough as anyone.

In 1999 the match was not well officiated. There were 2 or 3 fouls against Mia Hamm that deserved red cards that were not given and several other fouls that deserved cautions that were not given not to mention obvious patterns of persistent infringement. The total foul count was about 31 for Nigeria and 6 for the US.

In 2003 things were a bit different. The coach had changed and there was a greater physical presence for the US. The US again won by several goals and the officiating was better though still not good enough. In 1999 there was no sign of the US retaliating but there certainly was in 2003. Shannon Boxx and a couple of others knocked over Nigerian players who got overly physical. The referee could have done better controlling this but the players were able to control each other.

This was the prelude to 2007. The US has another coaching change and a greater physical presence. Mia Hamm is not there. Abby Wambach is now a major threat in the attack. She may not be as skilled as Hamm but is large, strong and takes nothing from nobody. She will trade elbows with any defender and intimidates them. That is part of her success.

All of this will require a tough referee to keep this match under control.

The US should still win easily but that won't make the game easy to referee.

Unless the referee calls fouls and gives a card or two early the players will beat on each other and make for an ugly match. At that point the players are deciding what is acceptable not the referee.

The referee will not come from Africa or North America. North America has the best but they are not available. There are other referees who can do it but she should be selected with care. I would look for someone with five years of FIFA experience including several qualifiers and a final or semifinal in their federation. More importantly the referee should have experience refereeing men's games preferably at the

second or third division professional level because the game will be that physical. The referee must be able to deal with serious misconduct.

I have said nothing that FIFA does not already know. They need to pick a referee who is experienced, tough and unafraid to use her authority when necessary. If they pick a lesser referee the match will go south.

Al Baer