

## OPINION

**THE VIEWS EXPRESSED BY CONTRIBUTORS ARE THEIR OWN AND NOT THE VIEW OF THE MESSENGER**

### Can the US Pull off a Women's World Cup Three-Peat?

Published 07/21/23 10:30 AM ET

Sheldon H. Jacobson, Ph.D.



Megan Rapinoe of USA lifts the winners trophy and celebrates with team mates after the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup France Final match between The United States of America and The Netherlands at Stade de Lyon on July 7, 2019 in Lyon, France. Photo by Craig Mercer/MB Media/Getty Images

The FIFA Women's World Cup has begun, with 32 of the best women's soccer teams from around the world converging in Australia and New Zealand, competing to take home the coveted prize. Given the sweltering heat in many areas north of the equator (like the southwestern United States and parts of Europe), having the event in the southern hemisphere — currently experiencing winter — means that heat will not be a factor.

The United States has won four of the nine Women's World Cups (1991, 1999, 2015 and 2019). They also have one runner-up (2011) and three third-place finishes (1995, 2003, 2007), their

worst performances. With over 340 Division I women's soccer programs at colleges across the nation, the number of quality players available for the national team is sufficiently large to field a superb unit for every Women's World Cup.

Such growth has been spurred by Title IX, ensuring that women have the same opportunities as men. Title IX prompted many colleges to add women's soccer and softball (now with more than 300 Division I colleges), to counterbalance the 85 scholarships a school can give out for football players. This has also limited men's soccer programs, which now have just over 210 such programs in Division I.

The success of the women's national soccer team has drawn significant interest in the team in general and the Women's World Cup in particular. The U.S. women's team has consistently been ranked No. 1 in the world, and enters this year's tournament as the favorite.

Winning is a formula for success and spectator interest for women's soccer, something that the U.S. men's team has been unable to attain. They are currently ranked 20th in the world by FIFA, which means that success at the world level in the near future is highly unlikely.

Given the attention that men's soccer gets in most countries around the world, with women's soccer often an afterthought, women's soccer in the United States has gained a competitive advantage that the U.S. team has used to launch themselves to the top of the heap.

Yet, the gap has narrowed in recent years.

Using the FIFA women's points total to determine rankings, in July 2019, the United States team had 2,180 points, compared to 2,059 for Germany, who were then ranked No. 2. Fast forward four years, the total points for the United States and Germany in June 2023 were 2,090 and 2,061, respectively. Teams from Sweden (ranked 3rd with 2,049 points) and England (ranked 4th with 2,040 points) suggest that this year's World Cup will be highly competitive. What this means for the U.S. team is that their road to a "three-peat" will not be easy.

Looking at the United States group, Portugal (ranked 9th in the world) will present the biggest challenge. If they advance into the Round of 16, Sweden (ranked 3rd) could be a possible opponent. After that, it gets more complicated, as upsets are certain to occur, which can upend expected outcomes in unpredictable ways.

Once the group rounds are completed, the tournaments become a single-elimination event. This means that an off day can derail the most well-laid plans. Given that soccer matches are often low-scoring, even a defensive lapse at an inopportune time can lead to a goal that could be the difference between winning and losing or advancing in the tournament.

"Survive and advance" will be the theme of the tournament. And with each advance, interest will grow from each country's followers. As this year's favorite, the United States team gets little more than a better group set of pairings and a statistical edge on paper in each game.

Yet, games are not played on paper, nor on computers. They are played on soccer fields, which produce an endless stream of random kicks, blocked shots and ball deflections. With such a narrow advantage, expecting a three-peat may be a bridge too far to cross. After all it is a feat no team — men or women — has ever accomplished before at the World Cup. Yet, wishing for victory is always a worthy hope. Once the final game is played on Aug. 20, we will know if such wishes have come to fruition.

*Sheldon H. Jacobson, Ph.D., is a professor of computer science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He applies his expertise in data-driven, risk-based decision-making to evaluate and inform public policy and has a particular interest in sports analytics, including how data can inform sports strategy, on and off the field.*