

NOT MAKING IT - THE TRUE CHALLENGE

(by Anson Dorrance, University of North Carolina Head Women's Soccer Coach and Former United States National Team Coach)

One of the biggest gripes some people have when they don't make a team is that it has to do with some political process. They blame lack of success on favoritism or prejudice. So, rather than discussing or evaluating failure through lack of ability or performance, the issue is politics. The problem with that specious argument is that it is made by those players on the bottom of the roster. So if you don't want to leave it to chance, don't let it be close. Make a clear statement in the trial about who you are and what you can do.

If you're a good player you are going to make it. If you're marginal, it may be left up to politics. If you want to be assured of making a team, be one of the top three or four players. Try not to be the 12th through 30th best for an 18-player roster, because in the selector's eyes, players below the top 11 hold diminished significance. You may feel you will improve, benefit from the training and contribute to the team, but that is not likely what the selectors are concerned with. The selectors are most interested in the truly elite. That is their main responsibility.

The politics of a tryout are well within your control by taking charge of your performance. If you play exceptionally well, if you demonstrate you can help the team win, you will be picked. If politics is a factor in the decision about you, you're avoiding the fact that you need to improve. If you're not picked, don't blame politics, blame yourself, so to speak. As soon as you accept responsibility, the world is your oyster, because now you are not at someone else's mercy, you are in control of your own destiny.

No one is immune to the risks or failures of the tryout process. Even those who have succeeded at the highest levels should never suffer from hubris - a sense of inflated pride and subsequent complacency. A young player might cruise through making higher and higher level teams, but as the competition gets tighter, one day she may be in for a big shock. Even on our level, we deal with recruited players who assume that after making it through youth National Teams, they will just keep ascending, all the way to the full National Team. What they don't understand is that the current members of the National Team hold down spots for years. Mia Hamm or Kristine Lilly aren't going anywhere. Michelle Akers played from 1985-99, so if you do the math, an aspiring young player has to be the best player in the country for 15 generations of National Teams, and beat out 15 years of challenges, to have a career like Michelle Akers. And this competition - if you use Mia Hamm as an example - begins when you are 15 years old, because that is when Mia was first selected to represent the full National Team. We don't know yet at what age this will end, until the retirement of the rest of the "91'ers" (i.e. Chastain, Fawcett, Foudy, Lilly, Hamm, etc. - those who played in the 1991 World Championships).

If you make a team, that is great. But if you don't, you get to demonstrate how determined, strong and noble you are. Rather than blame politics, or become devastated when your continual success hits a hurdle, take personal responsibility and use a setback to recover and refocus. You weren't selected, so you can begin to figure out ways to improve. You can resolve to come back next time, and be better. Ask yourself what your weak areas are, and because of this bump in the road, you will give yourself a chance to improve them.

Whether you're chosen or not, you're going to win, because there are wonderful victories in both cases. In fact, I think the higher-level individual can triumph greater in not being selected, because the strength to take responsibility and recommit, or the strength to accept that our best was eclipsed by someone else's best, is a more powerful statement of character than just making the team. Through adversity, you can grow more as a person, and a part of the growth can be a decision on who you have decided to become as a player.