

Mary 'Sully Sullivan': A Captains Recollection

The first game we played was against the Netherlands. It was in a torrential, freezing downpour. We attempted a short warm-up before the match, but our warm-up suits were too large and too long even for the tallest of us - the bottoms had no elastic around the ankles, so in the pouring rain, we found ourselves tripping over our ever-sagging pants. We began the match in soaking wet, cotton, long-sleeve jerseys. The freezing sleet and rain were blowing sideways, and the temperature was in the low 40s. I recall I had never been so cold in my life and I'm from Minnesota. It was really difficult to handle, so the ball was kept in the forwards much of the game. My teammates in the backline from Florida were in serious danger of hypothermia. I remember Candi Orsini jumping up and down saying - *we're having fun* - over and over.' We were not. Patty Jervey was blue-lipped and shivering, wondering out loud if Candi had lost it. For the backs, rain and cold are often the great equalizers; fortunately, we held our own that day but we did not and could not shine.

After the match, we raced into the locker room to find a line of showerheads that trickled out a small stream of lukewarm water. Each shower head had 2 or 3 players huddled under it trying to share the small dribble of water. We slowly peeled off our jerseys, jog bras, shorts and underwear with our shaking fingers. Many of us were so cold and cramped we could not untie our shoes, so our amazing managers crawled through the shower and untied our muddy laces and helped us take off our mud-caked cleats.

The second match against the USSR was a blowout. The Russians were good athletes but didn't know the game. Both the USSR and Japan created teams when they learned there might be a World Cup. I don't think they had played many matches, as they had been organized for less than a year.

We played New Zealand in the semi-final match. It was a close game. I believe we were fitter and perhaps just wanted it more. After the game, the New Zealand players burst into our locker room with bottles of Champagne to celebrate with us. Such is the essence of rugby.

Throughout the tournament the English players would come over to our hotel, hang out and drink pints. Many lasting friendships were formed during those gatherings. A few even snuck over the night before the final. Both sides joked the plan was to make sure the other team had hangovers for the final game.

The finals was in Cardiff Arms park. It was huge. I will never forget the panic I felt when I stepped onto the field. I turned to find my coach, Chris Leach (who was the assistant coach for the WNT), to ask how I was going to cover all this space. At that time in the US there were no true rugby fields. We often played on makeshift fields, most often football fields, which were narrow. Chris tried to comfort me by saying,

Remember, Sully she can only kick as far as she can kick. That did little to ease my anxiety as Karen Almond, the English flyhalf, had a very dangerous foot.

As we formed a circle before the final game with our arms around each other, I felt the moment's historic significance. I felt the power of all the women who came before us. The women who had defied social conventions to play a sport that women weren't supposed to play. All the young college women who knocked on dorm doors trying to recruit like-minded souls. I knew I was not the only one in that circle who felt the power of all the women – American, English, Dutch, New Zealand et al - who had orchestrated that historic moment. I still feel it.