

Barb Fugate: The 1991 World Cup Heartbreak

My trip to the first World Cup did not turn out at all the way I had envisioned it. It was simultaneously one of the highest points of my life, and the lowest. High, of course, because our team was so dominant, and there is nothing to compare to being a world champion. In anything, ever.

The low was the profound shock and disappointment of being injured early in the first match. I was the scrumhalf and clearly remember being knocked off balance a bit by the Netherlands' flyhalf when I jumped to block her kick. I came down awkwardly on my right leg, injuring my knee. As I lay in the cold mud and freezing rain, I thought, *This was not supposed to happen.*

Substitutions in rugby were different in those years. When a player was selected to start a match, the expectation was that they would play all 80 minutes. A team could only substitute two players, and those had to be for a verified injury. It wasn't good for the team that I had to be replaced so early in the first match.

Medical support was also different. We had a trainer for taping and basic injury treatment, but no team physio so there was no medical follow-up on my injury during the tour. We assumed it was my ACL, but I did not see any medical professionals for a diagnosis until we returned to the U.S.

So, I worked hard to get the swelling down and return to mobility. With the help of Sharon, our trainer, I was able to participate in a full practice by the final few days of the tour. But it was still unlikely that I would be selected, as I was not 100% and would have put the team

in the risky position of having to use one of only two substitutions. And as much as I wanted to play and imagined that I could, I was still on an unstable joint.

What I did earn, though, was a unique front row seat to history. As disappointed as I was at the time, I did not realize that I was gaining irreplaceable experience. I learned so much about the extraordinary traits of my teammates. I also got a glimpse of how coaches and players manage those high-stakes moments. And I was able to experience the ways elite competitors approached the game. While I was sad about my injury, those opportunities gave me insights I only began to understand years later.

In practice and at matches, I was absorbing many coaching skills, including player selection and player management, which I would use later as a club and USA U23

coach. I don't think anyone would choose that route to coach development, but in the long run, dealing with the injury and disappointment helped shape my coaching. And of course, I had the honor of being a part of that team of World Champions... that honor never gets old.