

Shadows and Stadium Lights: An Inside Look at the 2009 UNC Women's Soccer Team

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ABSTRACT

JEREMY CRAMER: Shadows and Stadium Lights: An Inside Look at the 2009 UNC
Women's Soccer Team
(Under the direction of Chris Roush, Paul Cuadros and Duncan Murrell)

Women athletes have consistently been underrepresented and misrepresented in the media, especially in team sports. In a series of articles, this master's thesis explores the lives of the players on the women's soccer team for the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The thesis includes a prologue, four chapters and an epilogue that document the 2009 season and the community on the team.

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Introduction

In 1971 in the U.S., 3.7 million boys competed in high school sports compared to only 294,000 girls, almost a 13-to-1 ratio. Since then, widespread changes fueled by the enactment of Title IX in 1972 have revamped the sports landscape. In 2009, 4.4 million boys and 3.1 million girls participated in high school sports, about a 7-to-5 ratio. Similar changes took place at every level from youth to collegiate sports and ultimately led to the arrival of new women's professional leagues (Messner & Cooky, 2010). In 1971, about 5 percent of high school athletes were girls, but in 2002, that number had shifted to 56 percent (Hardin, Simpson, Whiteside, & Garris, 2007, p. 212). Lapchick noted a more than 900 percent increase in high school participation between 1971 and 2008, as well as an increase in the collegiate athletics budget for women from 2 percent to 40 percent (2009, p. 1-2).

The overhaul in participation numbers might logically have led to a corresponding change in sports media, but that has yet to take place. By every measure and in every medium, women are consistently underrepresented, and often misrepresented, by sports journalists. On the Internet, on television, on the radio, in magazines, and in newspapers, women athletes are almost universally portrayed as second-class citizens whose athletic accomplishments are not seriously valued. Reporting on these women athletes usually lacks depth and quality, and frequently emphasizes femininity (or lack thereof) and sex rather than athleticism and skill.

The undeniable reality is that the public cares more about men's sports. Attendance at men's sporting events dwarfs attendance at women's sporting events. Editors and reporters might logically conclude that their job is to report what people care about—that media reflects interest. However, there are serious ethical questions wrapped up in that position. Sports, media and popularity are tightly woven together. In the sports world, the media does not merely reflect interest: the media creates interest. Ethical sports journalists have to wonder: Have women athletes been unfairly denied time in the spotlight? Would increased volume and quality of media exposure for women's sports change the dynamics of the "sports/media complex" (Helland, 2007) for women?

The assumption that men's sports are simply more entertaining than women's sports is deeply ingrained in American culture, but that entertainment value can never be separated from the medium that delivers the content and interprets its importance. The lack of quality coverage of women's sports is a decision to deny their importance. Journalistic responsibility mandates increased coverage of women's sports with greater depth, respect and quality, especially at the elite level. This is one such attempt: this thesis will explore the lives of a group of elite women's soccer players, emphasizing story, athletic accomplishments and community.

Literature Review

Women's Sports in America

Rapid changes in women's sports in the United States for the past 40 years have led to a large outpouring of literature, both academic and popular. Numerous attempts to understand and explain the shifting landscape have been and continue to be made in a variety of fields. This study will not attempt to comprehensively analyze this literature, but merely give a brief picture of the developments and current state of women's sports.

Participation numbers have taken a huge leap since the enactment of Title IX, but the culture has shifted more slowly. Women's sports live in the shadow of men's sports. Americans equate athleticism with masculinity and therefore question the femininity of the best women athletes. Women have faced an uphill battle for respect, a battle that they continue to fight.

In 1974, Dunkle argued against the double standard for men's and women's sports. Scott (1974) similarly pointed out the injustice of funding in American college sports. Dunkle stated that while women's collegiate sports do not turn a profit, neither do most men's sports, and profits do not determine legality (p. 19). She highlighted vast differences in sports funding between genders.

Women athletes are often regarded as biological misfits or mutations, while male athletes are revered as "real men." Women athletes are often regarded as cute little things who decorate the gym, while boy athletes are hailed as "the leaders of tomorrow."

Myths die hard. But times are changing. The double standard is on its way out. (p. 19)

While times have certainly changed since 1974, some of the tension from the 1970s remains, and the extent to which the “double standard” has disappeared is highly debatable.

The dramatic increase in opportunities for women athletes undeniably centers on Title IX. Funding and opportunity gaps like those found by Dunkle and Scott have faded because of Title IX. Both Wushanley (2004) and Lapchick (2009) detail a significant movement for women’s athletics prior to Title IX, but also clearly illustrate the massive influence of its enactment in 1972. The Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW) carried the baton for women’s collegiate sports prior to Title IX but then folded in 1982 as the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) adopted women’s sports. Legal battles between the AIAW and the NCAA highlight tensions about fundamental differences between men and women, tensions that remain today. The AIAW fought to shield women’s athletics from the spectator emphasis of men’s sports. Former AIAW president Donna Lopiano claimed, “When placed alongside the male, the female basketball player is a slow pygmy. . . . If judged on the same spectator interest criteria as men’s athletics, women’s athletics will always be considered an inferior product” (Wushanley, 2004, p. 1).

Lopiano’s assertion is at the center of the questions surrounding gender comparisons. Similar ideas have always been a part of discussions about the extent to which women’s sports should imitate men’s. Menzie (1974) claims, like Lopiano, that inasmuch as women’s sports “remain in the male sport subculture, they will be measured against the standards set by men” (p. 108). Menzie views this as an inevitably failing

proposition, and argues for the development of a separate sports culture for women, primarily because of the physical inequities. Sokolove (2008) states, “Experts in biomechanics know, conclusively, that many girls, even highly athletic ones, *run* differently than boys—with less knee bend and a more upright gait” (p. 10). Many of the high impact and explosive movements show gender differences, and there are programs attempting to teach girls to imitate boys (p. 11). There is little doubt that in some ways, to some extent, men are more genetically gifted athletes. However, physiological differences between sexes may be nowhere near as important in the American sports/media complex as psychological and cultural assumptions. “The notion that participation in vigorous competitive athletics makes a woman less of a woman, that is, less feminine, pervades the thinking of a large portion of our society,” West (1974) claims. “Absolutely no scientific evidence exists to support such a notion, but the idea does persist” (p. 96).

According to West, sports such as basketball, soccer and field hockey are not accepted as feminine, whereas sports such as swimming, golf and tennis are (p. 96). Basically, team sports are discouraged, while individual sports are accepted; the less potential for contact, the better. In 1974, this issue was openly discussed, but it is still subtly maintained today. According to a 2010 poll by Harris Interactive, eight of the 10 most popular male athletes play team sports, while only two of the 11 (there was a tie for the 10th spot) most popular female athletes play team sports (Corso, 2010). Six of the 11 women are tennis players, while none of the men are. Apparently, there is a neo-Victorian idea still prevalent in the United States that says sweaty women should not come in contact with each other. According to Meân and Kassing’s 2008 interview

analysis, professional women's soccer players still tiptoe around gender issues, unconsciously supporting male hegemony (p. 141).

Distinguishing between whether the barriers in front of women athletes are more physiological or psychological is impossible, but there is little doubt that both play a role. The most prevalent debates focus on whether an activity is appropriate for women, such as whether a woman sliding into third base or throwing a discus is too masculine (West, 1974, p. 96). Senda Berenson recreated basketball in 1892 for women so as to protect feminine values, changing rules to eliminate rough play and domination. Wushanley (2004) claims that Berenson's influence, built on a "Victorian" mindset, laid foundations for women's sports for the next half century (p. 10). Some also question the physical capabilities of women: until the 1980s, the Olympics did not include distance races for women.

While women's basketball now imitates men's basketball, and women's races are about the same length as men's races (NCAA cross country races are slightly longer for the men), women's bodies are still different from men's, and the training regimens have been built with men in mind. In *Warrior Girls: Protecting Our Daughters Against the Injury Epidemic in Women's Sports*, Sokolove (2008) argues that physiological differences between men and women leave women much more susceptible to certain injuries, especially ACL tears. He argues that women need to train differently. While Sokolove effectively showed a difference in susceptibility to ACL tears, questions remain. Most of his research is anecdotal, and he failed to provide conclusive statistics proving that injuries in women's sports are more common than in men's sports as a whole. Overall numbers of major injuries for both men and women, which Sokolove did

not provide, may show that men are injured more than women because of other factors, like that men compete in more violent sports, especially football. Different training techniques may alleviate the difference. Also, in a culture that places greater value on men's sports, men may have a significantly greater athletic background that protects them from injury.

Sokolove strongly questions the women's sports culture because of what he calls an injury "epidemic," but his purpose is not at all to reduce the importance of women's sports. He anticipated that opponents of Title IX, especially coaches and advocates of low-revenue men's sports such as wrestling, track and swimming, might use his arguments for their fight against Title IX, but that was not his goal (p. 10). He hopes that people will rethink the "insanity" of American youth sports (p. 11).

In the 1990s, Congress held two hearings to revisit Title IX, and soon after, President George W. Bush convened a presidential panel to examine Title IX. The question for Congress and President Bush was whether Title IX inadvertently damages men's sports (O'Reilly & Cahn, 2007, p. xii). Title IX is still controversial because of the claim that men's sports suffer because scarce resources go to women's sports instead, a position supported by more than half of newspaper editors and reporters surveyed (Hardin, Simpson, Whiteside, & Garris, 2007). This concern became evident soon after Title IX was passed (Scott, 1974). Hardin et al. (2007) argued that men's sports have not actually suffered, since men's participation numbers have actually slightly increased. There is no doubt, however, that minor men's sports have suffered at some schools for a variety of reasons, one of which is Title IX; the fault certainly does not lie with Title IX exclusively. In order for women's sports funding to match the men's at a given school,

either new funds have to be found or money must be taken away from men's sports. The simple, obvious reality is that both have happened. It is beyond the scope of this study to weigh the impact of Title IX; the debate includes philosophical questions that reach far beyond the numbers. "Behind all this talk about athletic programs for women and athletic programs for men is the concept society holds as to what is masculine and what is feminine" (Scott, 1974, p. 87).

Despite concerns of excesses and injuries, fears of advocates for minor men's sports and fundamental questions about what it means to be feminine, the overwhelming conclusion is that increased opportunities for women has been almost universally positive. "Sports have freed women, and continue to free women, from restrictive dress, behaviors, laws, and customs—and from the belief that women can't or shouldn't achieve or compete or win" (Nelson, 1998, p. xi). Nelson calls the story of women's sports "the story of women's liberation" (p. ix). Zimmerman and Reavill (1998) argue that research clearly paints a dark picture for adolescent girls, but that sports rescue many from American cultural pitfalls. The benefits of sports are numerous and far-reaching, and Zimmerman and Reavill's writing drips with optimism despite the surviving disparities they cite. One glaring concern is the lack of women role models for young athletes. To where do they trace the root of that problem? "The national media offer only minimal news coverage of our daughters' sports heroines or of the women's teams they follow. Studies reveal that more than 95 percent of national sports coverage pertains to male athletes" (p. xi).

Women's Sports and the Popular Media

Sports media are unlike any other kind of media, and sports are unlike any other kind of entertainment. The sports industry is worth billions of dollars. The average salary for the top 50 highest paid athletes in America reached an all-time record in 2010: \$26.2 million. All of the top 50 are men, and almost all of them compete in high-profile team sports—the list includes two golfers, one boxer and three race car drivers; the rest play football, basketball and baseball (Freedman, 2010). This massive industry depends deeply on the mass media. According to Kane (1988), Hardin (2005), Koppett (1984) and Messner and Cooky (2010), the role of the mass media is not merely to reflect the cultural view of athletics, but also to create it, including the cultural view of women athletes.

It has been known for many years that sports news and highlights shows do not simply “give viewers what they want,” in some passive response to demand. Instead, there is a dynamic reciprocal relationship between commercial sports and the sports media. Media scholar Sut Jhally called this self-reinforcing monetary and promotional loop the “sports-media complex” (Jhally 1984). When we add fans into this loop, we can see how information and pleasure-enhancement are part of a circuit that promotes and actively builds audiences for men's sports, while simultaneously providing profits for men's sports organizations, commercial sponsors, and the sports media. (Messner & Cooky, 2010, p. 26)

Koppett (1984) writes that perceptions about sports are more important than reality, “and those impressions are formed only through the connecting link of words and pictures. Only through newspapers, magazines, radio and television sets, and occasionally a book can the consumers – the spectators – get the information they need to make the entertainment entertaining” (p. 3-4). Other forms of entertainment are not so dependent on journalism; this “odd relationship” (p. 4) is unique to sports. Koppett's thesis predates

the Internet, but the Internet only strengthens his argument, as the Internet amplifies the pervasive power of media.

Koppett effectively argues that the impact of sports relies heavily on “illusion,” “suspense” and “identification” (p. 15) to reach the minds and hearts of the public. “The entertainment value of sports lies not in the physical actions observed but in the feeling aroused in those who interpret the meaning of those actions” (p. 15). Sports are boring to those who have not accepted the illusion of the importance of particular sporting events, and therefore become emotionally invested in the outcome. There has to be some level of “identification: with stars as individuals, teams as entities, and outcome as victory or defeat” (p. 15). Illusion, suspense and identification are created, not reflected, by journalists. “TV news and highlights shows do not simply ‘reflect’ fan interest in certain sports, as sports commentators and editors often argue,” Messner and Cooky (2010) say. “They also help to generate and sustain enthusiasm for the sports they cover, thus becoming a key link in fans’ emotional connection to the agony and ecstasy of spectator sports. (p. 26)

In light of Koppett’s and Messner and Cooky’s arguments, it is difficult to overestimate the power wielded by journalists throughout the sports world, and they have almost ignored women. The drastic increases in women’s athletics should logically have led to a similar increase of media coverage of women’s sports. A 1990 study comparing television coverage of men’s and women’s sports found that this was not yet the case, but responses to the study remained optimistic:

The study concluded that since women’s sports received only 5% of TV news coverage, people who get all or most of their information from television news would have little idea how dramatically sports had changed. One common response to the 1990 study was an optimistic view: members of the public and

many students with whom we discussed our findings assumed that TV coverage was simply lagging behind the surging popularity of women's sports; they predicted that media coverage would gradually catch up to the growing participation rates of girls and women in sport. (Messner & Cooky, 2010, p. 22)

Shockingly, television coverage of women's sports has actually decreased since 1990. "Women's sports in 2009 received a paltry 1.6% of the coverage on TV news, and an anemic 1.4% on ESPN's *SportsCenter*" (Messner & Cooky, 2010, p. 22). Coverage of women athletes is rare, of course, but also poorer quality, according to Greer, Hardin and Homan (2009). Greer et al. compared 2004 TV footage of Olympic male and female athletes competing in the same sports and found vast differences in the coverage. "This study found that coverage of male athletes used more of everything: more time, more segments, more variation in field of view, more variation in point of view, more slow motion, and more use of rail-cam" (p. 184). Out of the television coverage analyzed, Messner and Cooky (2010) found no examples of women lead stories. Reporters focused more attention on men's sports that were out of season than on women's sports that were in season (p. 4). Rare examples of women's sports making highlight shows included controversies such as fighting in the middle of competition (p. 5).

Angelini's 2008 study analyzing TV viewer response to both male and female sports found that viewers reported a higher level of arousal when watching male sports, which can be reasonably anticipated by cultural expectations, Koppett's theory and Greer's study. The enormous background Americans have of men's sports has created a deeply rooted illusion of importance; viewers likely know the teams, the athletes and the storylines far more than they do for the women's sports. Intriguingly, however, Angelini found that physiological arousal data did not match self-reported arousal. The human body was similarly aroused for both male and female sports, but viewers, especially men,

self-reported otherwise. Angelini's research suggests that TV viewers "have been taught to believe that sports with male athletes are inherently more exciting and arousing," (p. 27) and therefore believe that their experiences align with that idea, even when their physiological response suggests otherwise.

Study after study revealed that women's sports are consistently underrepresented in all varieties of media, and when women athletes are represented, too often their athletic achievements are deemphasized. In particular, women's team sports are frequently ignored. Hardin, Dodd & Lauffer (2006) claim that only 5 percent to 8 percent of total sports coverage is devoted to women's sports when women represent 40 percent of the participation. Women are underrepresented and misrepresented in newspapers (Hardin, 2006; Everbach, 2008, Hardin & Whiteside, 2009), in sports magazines such as *Sports Illustrated* (Kane, 1988; Fink & Kensicki, 2002) and on television (Messner & Cooky, 2010; Neverson, 2010; Greer et al., 2009; Messner, Duncan & Cooky, 2003).

Hardin (2006) and Everbach (2008) both found that newspaper editors consistently ignore women's sports stories. Everbach found little variation even when the editor was a woman. The editor's gender did not change the fact that women's sports received shorter clips tucked inside newspapers. Hardin found that editors simply assume that their audiences prefer coverage of male sports without systematically determining if that is actually the truth, and that assumption is built on their personal ideologies. Hardin also found that some editors say they feel no commitment to covering women's sports. Hardin and Whiteside (2009) echoed Hardin's 2006 study, this time interviewing reporters. In both studies, a strong societal influence held back reporters and editors from making reporting of women's sports a priority.

A year after the enactment of Title IX, *Sports Illustrated* placed a woman on the cover with the words: “Women are getting a raw deal.” The lead article spanned 11 pages including ads, and it detailed numerous inequities. Since that time, budgets and participation numbers have improved dramatically, but coverage from *Sports Illustrated* has remained basically unchanged. Each year out of more than 50 covers, *Sports Illustrated* includes one swimsuit model and about one token female athlete, usually from a traditionally feminine sport, frequently in a nonathletic pose that may subtly (or not so subtly) hint at sex rather than athleticism.

Brief glimpses of hope for women’s sports came in the late 1990s. Both the 1996 Olympics and 1999 World Cup illustrated the potential of women’s sports for a mass audience.

The success of the United States’s female athletes in the 1996 Olympics spawned a great deal of public enthusiasm for women’s sports in America. In the span of just a few weeks, the U.S. women’s Olympic basketball team was chosen for the cover of *Sports Illustrated*, Sheryl Swoopes appeared on the cover of *New York Times Magazine*, *T.V. Guide* ran two cover stories about Olympic female athletes, and *Newsweek* featured Olympic gold medallist Gwen Torrence in proclaiming 1996 the “Year of the Woman.” Along with this wave of interest came the concomitant optimism that all female athletes—traditionally feminine or not, mother or childless, heterosexual or lesbian or bisexual—would finally receive full societal acceptance and an unwavering appreciation of their athletic accomplishments rather than merely their sex appeal. (Fink & Kensicki, 2002, p. 318)

The Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) began play in 1997, and *Sports Illustrated* experimented with a new magazine, *Sports Illustrated for Women*.

Fink and Kensicki (2002) examined content from both *Sports Illustrated*, the sports magazine with the largest circulation in the world, and *Sports Illustrated for Women* from 1997 to 1999 and found that while *Sports Illustrated for Women* obviously had more content about women, much of the content continued a long tradition of de-

emphasizing the athletic accomplishments of women. Not surprisingly, *Sports Illustrated* had little coverage of women, and a higher percentage of the women's stories emphasized topics other than sports (personal, victim, personal health and fashion). The infrequent photographs of women had a higher percentage of inactive poses. While in *Sports Illustrated* 87 percent of the stories about male athletes were coded as "sport related," only 43 percent of the *Sports Illustrated for Women* articles about female athletes were coded as sport related. "Although female athletes are becoming stronger, faster, and more talented than ever, little progress is being made in relation to the media's depiction of them as athletes rather than feminine role models or trivialized sex symbols" (p. 330).

When Fink and Kensicki published their study in 2002, they did not know that *Sports Illustrated for Women* would fold soon after. In fall 2001, Women's Television Sports Network (WTSN) was launched in Canada, the world's first network dedicated solely to women's sports. The network stopped broadcasting two years later (Neversen, 2010). "Ultimately, the opportunity to broadcast radical representations of women's sport will exist, but economic imperatives will undeniably do more to stifle these innovative attempts than promote them" (p. 45). Apparently these isolated attempts to build an audience for women's sports were insufficient to overturn a long historical foundation of denying importance to women's sports. That foundation is even written into journalism textbooks, which promote gender stereotypes and reinforce male hegemony, according to Hardin, Dodd and Lauffer (2006).

The most stunning exception to the near-law of the sports/media complex's refusal to cover women came at the 1999 World Cup, when women's soccer burst into the mainstream in the United States. Just a few years earlier, in 1991, the U.S. women

had won the first world championship for women's soccer, barely making a blip on the national radar.

Newspapers around the world ran flashy stories throughout the World Championship and television crews beamed games back to more than one hundred countries, but not to the United States. When the tournament began, the American media contingent consisted of *Soccer New England*, *Soccer America*, *Soccer International*, *Shots on Goal*, and just one daily publication, *USA Today*, which sold out before dawn to fans in America's few soccer hotbeds. Many U.S. players sent home faxes to their friends and family to report the results. As the U.S. team advanced through the draw, the New York Times and the Washington Post dispatched stringers, and Sports Illustrated sent a correspondent from Beijing who had never covered a soccer match. (Crothers, 2006, p. 158)

The popularity of women's sports grew throughout the 1990s, and the U.S. women's soccer team repeatedly proved that it was the best team in the world, including winning the 1996 Olympic gold medal in Atlanta. Mia Hamm, while crucial to the 1991 championship, was still in college and not yet a team leader. Her stock rose dramatically during the next several years. By the start of the 1999 World Cup, she was the all-time international leader in goals scored, and the media took notice.

It is difficult to overestimate the drastic difference in media interest during the 1999 World Cup from any previous coverage of women's soccer. The games appeared on national television and players appeared on commercials and on TV shows with David Letterman, for example. *Sports Illustrated*, which had almost completely ignored women's soccer until that time, put players from the team on two covers and had several in-depth articles about the team and the nation's reaction, loaded with phrases such as: "Kicking butt," "powerhouse offense," "fan frenzy that swept the nation," "Suddenly the U.S. women were a topic worthy of barroom debate," "the revolution is here, and it has bright-red toenails," "one of the first women's teams with their own groupies," "out of this world," "breathtaking," "absolutely impossible not to watch," "technically perfect

and emotionally riveting,” “Queens of the World,” “national obscurity to a conversation piece in just three weeks,” “wonderful combination of Amazonian ambush and after-prom party,” “The U.S. women’s soccer team is towing the country around by the heart,” “The women’s soccer team is a machine,” “juggernaut,” “engender years of debate,” “Every game is a happening, a Thrillith Fair packed with girls and moms” and “seminal moment in women’s sports.” The World Cup final was the most watched soccer match in the history of network television with an estimated 40 million U.S. viewers, and 90,185 fans filled the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, a record for a women’s sporting event. Stars from the team landed on the cover of *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Sports Illustrated* and *People* all in the same week, becoming the only people to ever do so (Brennan, 2009). Wahl (1999) wrote, “A media throng of 2,100 attended the tournament as well—or 2,099 more than greeted the U.S. team in 1991, when it returned from China carrying the first Women’s World Cup trophy.” Wahl was technically incorrect, as three reporters actually met the team at the airport in 1991 (Lewis, 1999).

Ten years later, media outlets were still writing about that 1999 World Cup (Brennan, 2009; Lisi, 2010).

It was the first time this country fell for female athletes who were not in dresses, leotards or swimsuits, but in baggy soccer uniforms. It was the first time macho male sports fans found it not only acceptable, but actually kind of cool, to watch a women’s sports event that wasn’t the Olympics or a Grand Slam tennis final. And it was the first time young female athletes could see that the nation was riveted by something they might someday do. (Brennan, 2009)

Many articles at the time, and even Bill Clinton, according to FIFA, declared that this was just the beginning, that the event would effect changes. “‘The whole country is caught up,’ said former President Clinton. ‘It’s going to have a bigger impact than people ever realized, and it will have a far-reaching impact not only in the United States but also

in other countries.” FIFA declared, “The final FIFA Women's World Cup of the century launched the beginning of a new era of success for women's football and was a milestone in the history of women's sports.”

Hamm scored the Americans' first goal of the tournament but then had only one more goal throughout the team's six games. Nevertheless, her name resonated with the nation after a slowly building series of articles, awards and commercials before the World Cup. Perhaps most importantly, she appeared in a Gatorade commercial competing one-on-one with Michael Jordan in a series of sports and throwing him to the ground with a judo move in the climax. Her full name did not appear in the commercial, just “Mia,” suggesting that people were expected to know who she was. That commercial may have been the most important event in the history of U.S. women's soccer, and perhaps women's sports in general, because in the eyes of the casual American sports fan, Hamm had just been anointed with credibility by the greatest sports icon in the U.S.

Contrary to numerous predictions, the stunning popularity of Hamm and the 1999 team has not transferred to other women's sports or other athletes. While the U.S. National Team has remained ranked either first or second in the world since 2003 and has held the top spot since March 2008, popularity has faded. The team won the 2008 Olympic gold medal without the help of any of the stars from 1999 and without any of the publicity. A new women's professional soccer league grew out of the popularity of 1999, but folded just a couple years later. Hamm landed on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* in 2003, the third time for 1999 World Cup team players after the two covers in 1999, but no other women's soccer players have appeared on the cover before or since.

Beginning in 2004, Harris Interactive has published survey results of America's favorite female sports star. Even though Hamm retired in 2004, she has been in the top five every year, and no other soccer player has appeared on the list at all. In 2009, basketball player Candace Parker was fourth; otherwise, no other team sport athlete has ever appeared in the top five. Hamm is one of only three athletes to appear on the list every single year, but the other two have been actively competing in a traditional women's individual sport the entire time: tennis. The 2010 list includes Hamm at fourth and basketball player Lisa Leslie at ninth but no other team sport athletes. A quick Google search for images of the top eight athletes listed finds images of seven of them clad in a bikini (or less) on the first page of results. Hamm is the only exception. Hamm is consistently referred to as the primary example of a star woman athlete who has made her name without using sex.

In contrast to media focused on women's physical appearance and sexual attractiveness, some media portray women as active and athletic, and select women athletes, such as soccer star Mia Hamm, are household names based on their athletic skill. However, women athletes are also sexualized in media, such as swimmer Amanda Beard in *Maxim*, *FHM*, and *Playboy* magazines, who has become widely known for her looks rather than her athletic accomplishments. (Daniels, 2009, p. 400)

In 1971, the year before Title IX, one out of 51 *Sports Illustrated* covers featured a female athlete (tennis player Evonne Goolagong) while the magazine also featured one horse and one scantily clad female model. In 2009, none of the 52 standard issue covers featured a female athlete (although there was still room for another horse and a near-nude female model). Because of the popularity of the World Cup team, three 1999 covers featured female athletes, and there was hope that this would start a trend. Four 2000 covers featured female athletes, although one showed Anna Kournikova in a nonathletic

pose (she is lying on a pillow, and the image emphasizes her bare shoulder and neck). In 2001 none of the covers featured female athletes, although the magazine still had room for its swimsuit model, as well as an issue featuring the retired 1972 Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders. Since then, *Sports Illustrated* has never varied significantly from its long tradition of about one token cover per year for female athletes and none in 2009.

A 2009 study by Daniels found that women athletes are underreported and frequently sexualized. Daniels' research suggests that images and reporting that focus on women athletes as athletes, rather than sex symbols, has "the potential to empower female viewers to focus on what their bodies can do unlike the large volume of media that sexualizes female bodies and causes psychological distress" (p. 415). Bissel (2004) studied the impact of the reporting of women athletes and the effect on body self-esteem and eating disorders and found that different sports had different impacts. Bissel found distinctions in the literature between lean sports and "nonlean" sports. Sports are not universally positive for the self-esteem of girls and women. The relationship is complex. "Nonlean" sports such as soccer, where athletes wear loose, non-revealing clothing and thinness is not closely tied to performance, may be universally positive. Results were mixed for other sports.

Only one study found evidence that the media had equitably reported on women's sports (Kian, Mondello & Vincent, 2009). Results from the study showed a gap in quantity of coverage for Internet sites but not in content. For example, less of the coverage emphasized physical descriptions of the women athletes than in previous studies, focusing instead on the basketball itself, which contradicted hypotheses formed from previous studies. However, the quantity gap was simply too great to call this study a

victory for women's sports. CBS had television rights for the men's tournament and, not surprisingly, devoted most of the content from its Internet site to the men, at 93.7 percent. ESPN instead had television rights for the women's tournament, but devoted only 37.6 percent of content to the women. Even though ESPN had a significant economic reason to emphasize the women's tournament, the women still received less than half of the Internet content. Also, the nature of basketball may lend itself more naturally to reporting similar to how men's basketball is reported as a nonlean team sport with baggy clothing and a professional league. The conclusion by Kian et al. that their study contradicted previous studies may be heavily influenced by the nature of the sport they covered. Finally, Messner and Cooky (2010) found similar evidence that suggested a decline in negative reporting that disrespected women athletes. Previous studies had found more evidence of sarcastic humor mocking women and their fans or descriptions of the athletes as sexual objects, but less of that was taking place in 2009 TV coverage. Messner and Cooky's conclusion was simple: sports reporters had stopped ridiculing female athletes and no longer knew how to report on them, and the overall quantity of reporting had therefore plummeted.

Messner, Duncan and Cooky (2003), like the authors of so many articles and books about women's sports written since 1999, led with an anecdote inspired by the dramatic explosion of interest in the Women's World Cup. A reporter called one of the authors and asked, "Do you think that the tremendous attention that these women are getting will spill over into greater media coverage of women's sports in general?" The author's reply: "Well that depends on you, doesn't it?" (p. 38). Journalists do not simply reflect interest; they create it. The sports/media complex is deeply interdependent, and

journalists have choices that determine the importance of women's sports to the population. The explosion of interest during the 1999 World Cup proves that when a variety of media combine to report on women athletes as athletes, they can capture the imagination of the nation's fans. With more reporting of greater depth, the success of 1999 could happen again, but with more staying power.

In-depth Writing about Women's Team Sports

By every measure, coverage of women's sports is lacking, so it comes as no surprise that in-depth writing of women's sports is lacking as well. It is extremely difficult (and probably unimportant) to quantitatively compare amounts of in-depth writing about sports for each gender, especially if attempting to filter for quality. Studies previously mentioned found enormous gaps in overall coverage in *Sports Illustrated*, and that gap is clearly reflected in amounts of in-depth coverage. Also, if many quality journalistic books about women's sports do exist, they are extremely difficult to find. A quick glance at the sports section of the local bookstore will make the gender gap quite clear. I counted the books on a sports display table at a local Barnes & Noble: 52 total, one about dogs, one about horses and one about a women's tennis player. The rest were about men. One book about soccer in general devoted two out of more than 400 pages to women's soccer.

Each year one book wins the William Hill Sports Book of the Year award. The award has a clear United Kingdom emphasis, although many of the winning books have come from elsewhere, including the U.S. Since the award's inception in 1989, none of the winning books have focused on women athletes or sports. A horse has a more prominent

role than any women athletes. Even Simon Kuper's *Football Against the Enemy*, a book about the general history of a sport that women play (soccer), ignores women athletes. In a 2005 interview with *The Global Game*, Kuper was asked about the idea of writing a similar book about women's soccer. "I definitely think that could be a very good book," Kuper said, but he clarified that such a book would not be "my sort of thing. Women's soccer somebody else should definitely do."

In 2002, the staff at *Sports Illustrated* published a ranked list called *The Top 100 Sports Books of All Time* (McEntegart, Wertheim, Menez & Bechtel, 2002). The list included two books about horses and three books about women; both books about horses were ranked significantly higher than any of the books about women. Two of the books focusing on women athletes were about individual aesthetic sports (figure skating and gymnastics), while only one was about a team sport (basketball). *In These Girls, Hope Is a Muscle* by Madeleine Blais, ranked No. 65 on *Sports Illustrated's* list (the highest out of the books about women), chronicles a season of high school basketball. Intriguingly, the only book about women's team sports is about high school athletes rather than professional or college athletes, while almost all of the books about men chronicled elite team sports.

Every attempt to find quality, in-depth journalistic books about women's team sports turned up Blais' book and few (if any) others. Women's soccer, in particular, completely lacked almost any significant in-depth reporting until the late 1990s; there are a few biographies and other books of summary narrative, but few with significant immersive reporting or literary journalism. Most books about elite women's soccer players are about the 1999 World Cup and the players from that team, especially Mia

Hamm. Apparently writers and publishers attempted to capitalize on the popularity of the World Cup, but typically with books that gave simplified highlights of the events; they discovered the market potential too late for immersion journalism. Most of those books are simple compilations of brief summaries and highlights written for children.

I distinguish between literary narrative and summary narrative; many in-depth articles and books about women's sports are neither. Much of the writing about women's sports philosophically explores women and sports, rather than focusing on the athletes themselves. *Sports Illustrated* writes about how women are getting a raw deal rather than writing about the women who are getting a raw deal. Summary narrative is better, but my goal is to write literary narrative: I want my writing to read like a story, built from scenes and moments. Most newspaper writing is summary narrative: facts and quotes are woven together in an explanation-filled summary. Literary journalism is a creative attempt to make nonfiction read like fiction.

Gay Talese is one of the most important literary journalists in U.S. history. In a *New York Times* article about Talese, Kurt Andersen (2006) writes, "It's hard to overstate Gay Talese's gold standard reputation. A few years ago, David Halberstam called him 'the most important nonfiction writer of his generation, the person whose work most influenced at least two generations of other reporters.'" Talese attempted to ride the wave of the 1999 World Cup after he saw the championship game on TV. While other writers focused on stars such as Mia Hamm, Talese pursued a unique angle, as Andersen explains: "A Chinese player named Liu Ying misses a penalty kick, which gives the game to the Americans. 'Never in the history of China,' he writes breathlessly, 'had a single person so suddenly been embarrassed in front of so many people'" (2006). Talese

flew to China to pursue a story about Liu Ying and spent a year with the Chinese national team. Here was a rare case of an established, gifted writer devoting significant time to a women's team sports story with a surprising angle.

Talese came up with nothing. He buried his story about Liu Ying in *A Writer's Life*, a memoir about his struggles to find a story. "It's mostly an account of Talese's inability these last 14 years to find a story that he and his editors were excited about," Andersen writes (2006). Talese pursued a story about a women's soccer player but ultimately wrote a story about himself.

Talese was not the only one whose story about women's soccer was actually about a man, rather than the athletes. Hanna's *Beyond Winning: Memoir of a Women's Soccer Coach* (1996), is an in-depth story about a college women's soccer team. However, Hanna is not writing about elite soccer. The book is about the first year of women's soccer at the school with an inexperienced coach. Hanna took a job coaching women's soccer at a small college because he wanted to write about a sports team, but he had experience coaching baseball and football, not soccer. Hanna's writing is comic and primarily about himself. He does write about soccer, usually jokingly, but mostly he writes about his life and his struggles as an inexperienced coach and writer.

One of the most significant in-depth works about women's elite soccer covers my same subject, the UNC women's soccer team. Crothers (2006) thoroughly chronicles years of some of the best women's soccer in the world, but his story is ultimately a biography about a man: coach Anson Dorrance. Also, while the book contains moments of literary narrative, it is primarily summary narrative, which is probably inevitable for a story that covers so many years.

Ayub's *Kabul Girls Soccer Club: A Dream, Eight Girls, & a Journey Home*, Zimmerman and Reavill's *Raising Our Athletic Daughters: How Sports Can Build Self-Esteem and Save Girls' Lives* and Lisi's *The U.S. Women's Soccer Team: An American Success Story* are more examples of quality in-depth books about women's soccer, but none are literary narrative accounts of elite athletes. Ayub (2009) writes a human-interest story about girls in Afghanistan who have never played soccer before, while Zimmerman and Reavill (1998) write about girl athletes throughout the U.S. Neither is about elite athletes, and Zimmerman and Reavill's book is more philosophical exploration than literary narrative. Lisi's book chronicles the history the U.S. women's national team, and while it is about elite athletes, it is summary narrative. Even though it was published in 2010, the front cover image, the back cover description and the lead of the introduction (p. xiii) all highlight the 1999 World Cup. Lisi cannot stop talking about Mia Hamm, even in the few pages devoted to the six years of soccer after Hamm's retirement (p. 109-110).

To my knowledge, an in-depth book of literary journalism about elite women's soccer has never been written. Most reporting of women athletes faces an enormous challenge because the American public has limited background knowledge of the sport or the athletes. Koppett's illusion, suspense and identification grow out of background knowledge that sports fans already possess when they read a short article about Tiger Woods or watch a highlight clip of LeBron James. That background does not exist for women's sports. One huge advantage of an in-depth writing piece about women's sports is that illusion, suspense and identification can all be contained in one work.

Research Questions

What are some of the factors that contribute to excellent women's soccer? What happens behind the scenes to lead to on-field success for an elite soccer team?

What are the barriers to success, and how are they overcome?

What are the struggles and joys in the day-to-day lives of elite women's college soccer players? How do these athletes balance competitive soccer, academic requirements, relationships, and religion?

What is the community within an elite college soccer team like? How do relationships within the team change over the course of an intense season? To what extent do elite players depend on each other both on and off the field?

What role does religion play in the lives of believing athletes?

Method and Limitations

These questions were explored in chapters of literary journalism that tell the story of the 2009 UNC women's soccer season. The competitive season provides the basic framework of the chapters, but much of the story takes place away from the field. Some of the research involved photos, video, game recaps and box scores from games, but the bulk of the research was observation and interviews. Instead of summary and analysis, the goal is to tell the story as much as possible with a scene-by-scene account developed from immersion reporting, in-depth interviews and research.

The most important limitation to this study is that it involves only one team for one season. Little can be extrapolated to make conclusions about other women's soccer players and other athletes. This study emphasizes depth rather than breadth. Another limitation is that the 2009 season has already passed, so opportunities for observation are done. During the season, I spent a considerable amount of time with the team gathering information, but my time was limited. I had a full class load and fellowship work to complete, which left inadequate time for consistent, complete immersion. Also, as a male, there were some situations that I could not observe, although surprisingly few. The players I observed were extremely relaxed about that kind of thing. Another limitation is that since I was not doing a full-time shadow, I usually had to rely on the players to keep me informed about schedules and events. Informing me of their schedules was not especially high on their priority lists, but I managed to attend most significant events.

Because these are elite players, they have been in the public spotlight, sometimes nationally. They have done interviews for major news outlets, which is good and bad. The interview process is normal for them, but they are accustomed to providing simple, bland answers. My goal was to dig deeper than a typical news story can possibly dig, so the interviews had to be different. Immersion time, though limited, helped that significantly.

The ultimate goal of this project is to publish a book, but first I will adapt portions for magazine pieces. One article will focus on the development of the Christian community among these players from freshman year through their first year in professional soccer. This will involve more background from the players' first year at Carolina, more development from their first season apart in 2010 and fewer scenes from

the 2009 season. Another possible magazine piece will focus on the broader challenge of recreating 1999. I will develop some of the ideas from the literature review and use the most elite players from this story to discuss the struggles and possibilities of women's team sports. I will playfully consider the phrase, "the next Mia Hamm" and question the perception of women's sports. This could be an ideal piece leading up to the 2011 World Cup. Publications that might be interested in adaptations of one or both of these stories include *Soccer America*, *Sports Illustrated*, *World Soccer*, *90:00 Soccer*, *The Soccer Mag*, *Soccer 360*, *ESPN Magazine*, *Relevant Magazine*, *Charisma* and *Christianity Today*

Prologue

Nikki Washington lies on her back on the hard carpet in the middle of the locker room, a small pile of warm-up gear under her head. She shifts now and then, slipping her hands behind her head and then out to her side. It wouldn't be quite accurate to say that she fidgets because that sounds too nervous. She looks completely relaxed, as if she could fall asleep in the middle of the coaches' pre-game speeches. But every now and then, the skin between her eyebrows clenches, her characteristic look of intense concentration. She is not missing anything.

Head coach Anson Dorrance is a brilliant strategist and an inspiring, charismatic speaker who likes words with impact. Every pre-game includes a thorough analysis of the opponent and a mapping of how the game might go. He takes turns with assistant Bill Palladino breaking down each team's strengths and weaknesses. For example, they talk about how tonight's opponent, LSU, has a big, athletic goalie who is not afraid of contact. They also know that she often punches balls away instead of catching them, which could give the Tar Heels second chances. The players walk through every set, making sure each of them knows where to stand for corner kicks and free kicks on both offense and defense, and they talk about LSU's strategy for different sets.

Everything in the pre-game comes back to the big picture of Carolina strategy. Sprinting at every ball on defense. Sprinting to recover. Sprinting to attack on offense. Basically, "Hell bent for leather" on every play, as Anson says frequently. He tries to find

creative ways to restate this as much as possible; he can preach until he's blue in the face, but he knows the players have to buy in.

Nikki has heard this part before, of course, many times. So have the three players Nikki lives with: Tobin Heath, Casey Nogueira and Ali Hawkins. This is their fourth season playing for Anson together, but their history goes back even further, to their time on U.S. youth national teams together when they were 14 and 15.

Casey and Tobin sit on the floor with Nikki, while Ali sits on one of the benches on the outside. As usual, Casey looks lost in her own world while Ali, her head tilted to the side, is the only one of the four visibly engaged through every moment of the pre-game. While Nikki's brow furrows at key moments, Ali's is permanently locked in a similar position. She answers Anson's questions and asks her own. Tobin chimes in as well, but not as often as Ali, who is clearly one of the vocal leaders.

Other players around the room play with hair, look at fingernails, and check gear while they listen. They fill the benches that enclose the room and spill across the floor. A couple of them sit inside open lockers that line the walls. Clothes, cleats, shin guards, water bottles are scattered everywhere. The whole scene is a bit rag-tag.

The coaches don't mind when the tape starts going around the room, even with the loud tearing sounds. The players tape injuries of course, but they also wrap it around their wrists and write on it. One writes, "LOVE," another, "No Fear."

Nikki sits up when the tape comes to her. She writes "KM" as she has all four years, in memory of Kelly Muldoon, a fan the team fell in love with as she was dying of cancer during Nikki's freshman year. She writes "NEHF" for "No Excuse Have Fun." Although it doesn't always show, Nikki is one of the most intense personalities on the

team. Her position, right midfielder, demands that she sprint the full length of the field, often without touching the ball. Most teams have four defenders, but UNC only has three, placing a greater burden on midfielders to get back and help on defense. On offense, she also is expected to sprint to the corner, if only to serve as a decoy. At the beginning of the season she almost broke down with frustration. Sprint after sprint after sprint, but few touches on the ball. She flew home to Texas for a weekend, where one of her closest friends from youth soccer days reminded her of when she used to play for the orange slices at halftime. She draws an orange slice on her wrist tape to remind her of those days, when soccer was all about fun and orange slices.

But then she pauses. Normally, she writes one thing at the beginning of the year, and then it doesn't change for the rest of the season. Today, she decides to add something. "We will declare." It's a phrase that has been running through her head recently, from one of her favorite worship songs. She wants to declare that soccer is for Jesus. Not just her: we. Several of her teammates feel the same way, but she especially means Tobin, Casey and Ali. Their friendship started out being about just soccer, but everything has changed these past few years in Chapel Hill.

When the speeches finally end, they finish up their preparations, and as usual, Casey starts the music. Dancing is *the* essential part of her pre-game routine. Out on the field, the dancing continues with the music blaring throughout the stadium. Nikki laughs and jokes with Casey and Tobin through warm-up drills. If they feel any pressure, it doesn't show.

Casey has every intention of flipping on the music and dancing again after the game. But that day, there would be no dancing, and no laughing. The Tar Heels won, in a

much-too-close score of 1-0, but that didn't matter. Nikki's season was over. She went down early in the second half, knowing immediately that she had torn her ACL. Two days later, with Nikki in crutches, they would walk off the field without a win for the first time all season.

Instead of dancing, the players cried and held each other. Tobin and Casey pulled some of their teammates together to pray on the far side of a practice field, away from the lights and people. Fourteen team members sat in a circle holding hands, shoulders and grass-stained knees touching. One wrist tape said, "Believe."

Chapter 1

Invincible

Hadn't planned on rain. It had been a cool, pleasant evening with beautiful skies, and rain just didn't seem to match the mood. The place was starting to bubble up with the hope that comes with each new soccer season, and a warm August evening with Carolina skies felt like a reasonable expectation. But now clouds threatened to smother a sun that had every intention of disappearing on its own anyway.

Unless you really have a thing for the blue track that wraps around the lawn, Fetzer Field is usually ugly. Pastel blue knows she was never meant to scream so loud, and she's embarrassed by the awkward display. The indoor track is just a little too far away to frame the field, and the space in between manages to be both too empty and too cluttered at the same time. Rows of too-large-for-soccer bleachers extend right up to the wall of the indoor track, at least 100 feet past the edge of the field. The whole picture is unbalanced space, bland colors and extra junk. To top it off, every margin is juxtaposed with university construction, which is to say, never-ending projects with no obvious purpose.

Fetzer is *usually* ugly. But if you follow the sun as it sets over the thick trees that frame McCaskill Soccer Center, and you turn away from the hulking brick wall of the indoor track and frame your eyes to minimize the loud blue of the track and the vast expanse of cement and metal of the stands, and you focus instead on the streaking colors

of the sunset silhouetting trees and old buildings of the university in the distance, you're guaranteed a beautiful sight. Pinks and oranges and blues and gentle clouds slip down around the dark majestic silhouettes, which then continue down into the restful green of the field. When the stadium lights come on, they complete the picture, bursting into the subtle color palette of the sunset.

But the sky was not going to cooperate today. All was dark and dreary and wet and cold. The sun wouldn't get to say its goodbye; the sun — and Fetzer's best chance for beauty — would die at the hands of the heavy clouds. Hope laughed back at the sky's cruelty; the promise of new beginnings thwarted such trivialities as weather. Never mind that the fans would likely be sitting in soaking misery. The possibilities were far too tempting to even acknowledge the pessimistic maybes. As long as the game wasn't cancelled, and the soccer was anywhere near as good as the fans have imagined, they'd even take a loss. Sure, Carolina is used to wins, but this game had all the makings of last year's early season loss to Notre Dame, right here at Fetzer. The Carolina faithful remember how the team avenged 2008's lone defeat in the national championship game. Better to lose now, win later. Besides, these fans understand soccer. Virtually everyone here has played this game; otherwise they would've found something else to do on a dreary Friday night. Come on, women's soccer? These fans understand that a superior team can have a superior game but still lose or tie. UNC is the superior team 99 percent of the time, but if there was ever going to be a 1 percent, this looked like it. This UCLA team is *good*.

Both teams had been No. 1 seeds the year before in the NCAA tournament. When they met in the semis, Carolina had 23 wins, one loss and two ties (23-1-2), and the

Bruins were undefeated at 22-0-2. The Tar Heels won that game eight months ago but hardly convincingly. They struggled to find scoring opportunities against the best defense in the country. They squeaked by with a goal on a penalty kick, handing the Bruins a 1-0 loss, their only loss of the season. The goal was only the sixth UCLA gave up all year.

This season, UCLA had clear status as the West's flagship team, according to preseason predictions. UCLA had won the 2008 Pac-10 title outright, claiming victory in arguably the best conference in the nation other than UNC's own Atlantic Coast Conference. At last season's NCAA tournament, five of the final eight and three of the final four were from those two conferences. Everything pointed to a 50-50 clash and a one goal differential at most. Maybe even overtime. East Coast vs. West Coast. ACC vs. Pac-10. No. 1 vs. No. 3.

The audible buzz. Was that the stadium lights, or just anticipation?

The fans poured into the stadium, umbrellas and slickers in tow. There were all the usual suspects, beginning with the young girls with their friends from club soccer. Parents and siblings initially had no choice but to tag along, but they had all discovered in time: These women can *play*. Then there were the families of the players themselves, Super Fans (the team had given a couple of local older men t-shirts designating them as "Super Fans" after years of consistently attending games and practices), local soccer fanatics, the established fans from the student ranks and of course, the freshmen.

The freshmen had just moved into the dorms that week, and classes hadn't started yet, not until Tuesday. No homework, no club meetings, basketball and baseball still months away—even football would not start for a couple of weeks—just lots of Carolina freshmen juiced with excitement and social awkwardness, desperate for an outlet. It

would have taken one hallmate with the brilliant suggestion to watch some women's soccer and half the hall would have been lining up.

“Sweet! They're good, right?”

“Women's soccer? Any of them hot?”

“Oh, I love soccer. I used to play. I was ... I did ... I won ... I ... I ... I ...”

Both regulars and freshmen trickled in, only marginally concerned about the 7 p.m. deadline. There would probably be only one goal, and it would likely come late in the game once defenses had been worn down. But the 7:05 almost-on-timers were in for a shock when they casually strolled in and glanced at the scoreboard: UNC 2, UCLA 0.

Soccer is pretty simple. Eleven players per team, pass the ball around, try to knock it into the goal. Only the goalie can use her hands, and only inside the goalie box. Gravity dictates that most soccer is played with feet, which is why it's called football everywhere but America.

It just so happens that the foot is an excellent appendage for whacking inflated leather hard. The challenge is to control it. The ball flies off the foot with a mind of its own, so the struggle – and beauty – of soccer is that it is extremely difficult to possess the ball and even more difficult to get it to go where you want. In the goal, for example. The defense almost always has the advantage.

Goals are rare and exhilarating. They sometimes demand an extraordinary individual effort, sometimes flawless teamwork and sometimes dumb luck. Often, they demand all three. Defenders will quickly surround a player who is in range of a shot, so most goals are scored off a pass across the middle in front of the goal that catches the

defense off-guard. One player crosses to a teammate, who often has a chance for only one touch on the ball to put it into the goal before the defense collapses and knocks it away. A perfect pass to an open teammate in front of the goal does not guarantee a goal because a goal will still depend on a near-perfect touch (or a mishit that gets lucky—it counts the same). One-touch goals from a cross are sometimes absolutely brilliant to watch.

UNC's quick strikes against UCLA stunned the stadium. Right off the first whistle, UNC penetrated deep into UCLA territory and earned a close throw-in when the ball went out of bounds off a UCLA defender. As usual this close to the goal, Jessica McDonald, or Jess, UNC's athletic 6-footer, took the throw. Jess can launch her throws right into the middle of the field, so they are just as dangerous as crossing passes or corner kicks that land in front of the goal, except for the fact that she can't head her own throws. The tall center striker is the primary target for most of Carolina's set plays. A teammate will send the ball over the defense, hoping to place it so that Jess can knock it out of the air with her head. She is incredible in the air. The coaches would love to have two of her for these plays.

Carolina consistently puts the ball in the middle on set pieces even though a perfect one-touch is hard to come by, especially when the defense is prepared for it, because a missed first strike still opens up the potential that the ball will pinball around close to the net and someone will get a shot. This time, no one on either team had a clean strike out of the air, but the ball ricocheted off of a UCLA defender to Tobin Heath. Perhaps it was luck, but Tobin has an uncanny ability to be at the right place at the right time. She does just about everything right on the soccer field, which is why she was the youngest member of the 2008 Olympic team, the team that won the gold medal. She did

it right this time, too, taking one touch to find the back of the net. 1-0. Only 41 seconds into the season, Tobin and the Tar Heels had their first goal, stunning the Bruins.

Three minutes later, they were at it again. This time, it was Casey Nogueira's turn to send the ball into the middle. Casey has unbelievable touch and power, and she led the nation in scoring the year before, winning five national player-of-the-year awards. She also won the Mary Garber Award for the female athlete of the year in the ACC. She sent a powerful cross from the left side that bounced off a Bruin and continued across to the right side, to sophomore forward Courtney Jones. Courtney pushed it back into the middle for captain Ali Hawkins. Coach Anson Dorrance calls her "The Hawk" and says she is one of the best leaders he has coached since the creation of the women's soccer program at UNC back in 1979.

The Hawk finished. 2-0.

UCLA did not give up more than one goal in any game during the entire 2008 season. The Tar Heels already had two, 3:44 into the first game of 2009.

Even without knowing the score, everyone watching the next 20 minutes could see that the Tar Heels were dominating. They controlled every possession, won every ball, and pretty much did whatever they felt like doing. It was beautiful soccer, stunning for the first game of the season. It usually takes several weeks of practice for teams to develop tight rhythm as a team. There may be only a handful of teams in the world that can play like this, even deep into their seasons.

It came as a surprise to no one in attendance that 2-0 became 3-0 a few minutes later. Courtney passed to Jess, Jess passed to Casey, and Casey did what the reigning national player of the year does best.

When Casey got the ball within range of the goal, the whole stadium paused. Everyone wondered what kind of magic she would create; coaches and players all over the field became pure spectators. Casey cemented her legend a year before when she led the nation with 25 goals. Tom Soker, one of the team's student managers, attended games and edited video for the team, and he watched her goals over and over again. "It was unbelievable. It was like a video game. No, better than a video game." There were moments that year when he would see her get the ball and know what was about to happen. "She's about to score." Then she would score.

This time, she had a one-on-one with a defender several yards out on the left side, well outside the usual comfort zone for launching a shot, but Casey's comfort zone is about twice as big as the average forward's. She gathered the ball and let the stadium pause with her. Her body language seemed so calm, so confident, that her decision seemed less about which move would work and more about which move she felt like making. Any of them would *work*.

Go left and cross?

Go right and shoot?

Nutmeg the defender (tap it between her legs) and dribble toward the goal?

She chose to go right and fire a shot. A few quick touches put her outside the defender and BOOM! The ball hit the back of the net almost instantaneously. The power itself was so impressive, it would have drawn a rush of applause even if it had been off target. Instead, she sent a laser around the goalie and inside the far post. The crowd erupted. That combination of power and control makes Casey's right foot one of the most dangerous weapons in women's soccer. Her left is almost as deadly.

One of the students in the crowd, a senior who had seen this before from Casey, laughed, tilted his head back, lifted his eyes to the sky and confidently proclaimed, “Casey Nogueira is *easily* the best player in the country. *Easily*.” He was baiting anyone to challenge that statement. No takers.

Later, Casey had another almost identical chance from the same spot. Another one-on-one, another pause that hushed the stadium, another decision. This time she pulled left and sent a perfect left-footed cross that curved right in front of the goal onto the foot of a charging teammate. The striker (forward) didn’t get a clean touch, but Casey’s cross was still sharp.

Casey continued to light up the left side of the field, frequently pairing with Tobin, her best friend and a likely challenger to the title of best player in the country. Casey and Tobin look for each other and play a two-person game with slick passes, tight dribbling, and give-and-goes. Tobin would give to Casey and go, slashing up field. Casey would touch it back. In one sequence midway through the first half, they found each other for back-to-back give-and-goes. Casey gave, Tobin touched back to a sprinting Casey, who one-touched again as Tobin slashed to the end line for a cross. They looked like they were having too much fun out there together, making the Bruin defenders look silly.

One of the soccer dads in the crowd who had discovered these players through his 10-year-old daughter noticed the unique teamwork between Casey and Tobin. From under his umbrella, he talked about an Internet video that had wowed. In the video, Tobin and Casey toss the ball back and forth in the air, catching it with one leg, the ball pinched

between a foot and shin. “They kept tossing it back and forth – they did it like 50 times.” For the record, the video shows 57, but their all-time best is 79.

Casey would score again with another laser shot, this one from closer in. Then, after already notching three assists, Courtney scored her first goal, and the Tar Heels had a 5-0 lead. The Bruins finally got on the scoreboard with a meaningless goal after 75 of the 90 minutes had gone by. After a wild finish with three more goals in the final four minutes, the game ended at 7-2.

That’s right: *seven*. UCLA had given up six goals *total* last year, in 25 games. Six different players had scored for the Tar Heels, with only Casey scoring twice. Courtney had a goal and three assists, and Tobin had a goal and an assist. The country had already known that UNC was good, but this was absurd. The rest of the country could only hope that it was a fluke. Not surprisingly, Casey raked in the national player-of-the-week awards as the leading scorer in a rout of one of the top teams in the country.

But the Tar Heels would have dominated without her. The accolades could have just as easily gone to Courtney or Tobin. The stat sheet can only say so much in soccer; the most important measures are basically just goals and assists. Statisticians also keep track of points, but that is just a summation of goals and assists, with each goal counting for two points and each assist counting for one. Courtney actually had more points than Casey, with five points on a goal and three assists to Casey’s four points on two goals.

Goals and assists matter, but there are a million intangibles that are invaluable for a successful team. Tobin had a goal and an assist, but that says nothing about her impact on the game. She was all over the field, in the middle of every play. She has some of the best trickery in the world, but over and over again that night, she made decisions to get

her teammates involved. She seemed to make perfect decisions every play, sending one-touch passes when the play needed to go quick, and controlling the ball when the Tar Heels needed to slow down.

The players were excited after the game, but they downplayed its importance, albeit through confident smiles. Carolina plays the toughest schedule they can early in the season to know what they need to work on. Tobin said the team is fine with quality losses early in the season. During both championship runs that Tobin was a part of, in 2006 and 2008, the Tar Heels lost close games to top-ranked opponents in the first few games of the season. In both cases, they would go on to avenge that loss in the NCAA Tournament.

They would have accepted a quality loss to UCLA. Instead, 3,372 fans had braved the steady downpour to witness a throttling. It was worth it.

Fetzer wasn't at its best, but the soccer was beautiful.

Chapter 2

Ragtag Followers of Jesus

It always had to be about “the Jesus part.” That’s the only way Tobin would have it.

Tobin and Casey had agreed to meet with me to discuss my idea of writing about their season. They were serious athletes, so I figured we should meet at a place with a variety of healthy choices—things like salad, grilled chicken, and whole grain pasta with lots of vegetables. They ordered two root beers and one heaping pile of macaroni and cheese that they placed in between them.

I explained a little about the kind of writing I wanted to do, that I didn’t want to just interview them for a typical sports story. I wanted to show their world. These are the most recognizable players on the best women’s soccer team in the NCAA. UNC’s sports media office has the impossible task of choosing between them—Casey for this pamphlet, Tobin for that website advertisement. They won national championships together as freshmen and juniors in 2006 and 2008, and they entered the 2009 season ranked first and looking to repeat. Casey won five national player of the year awards for the 2008 season after leading the nation with 25 goals. She scored both goals in the team’s 2-1 victory in the NCAA championship game. Tobin was already a full active participant with the women’s national team. They’d both been written about frequently but rarely with much depth. Local newspapers make room for short game stories,

championship recaps, and occasional profiles for women's soccer. Major sports media outlets like *Sports Illustrated* and *ESPN* devote far less space to women's soccer, although they can't ignore players with such elite credentials. Few know about the story beyond the box score.

Tobin and Casey seemed fine with my idea as I explained the time and access that I would need. Then, Tobin stepped back. She explained that they wanted to be fully committed if they did this. It was likely that they would give me the green light, but she wanted more time to be sure. They needed to pray about it first.

Tobin said that she would only be interested if the story included "the Jesus part." She wasn't going to let me leave out how important Jesus is to them. She thought I could show the subtlety of their Christian community. She raised her arms and proclaimed, "I'm a Christian!" mocking the absurdity of trying to express that in short interviews. She expressed frustration at the superficial reporting about Christian athletes and thought that I might be able to show what it was really like.

I had made it clear that I was not going to be able to give equal writing space to 31 soccer players; she made it clear that I was not going to be giving all the writing space to just two soccer players. At the least, the story would have to include Nikki and Ali.

At one point while Tobin was explaining her thoughts, Casey reached for the Asian hot sauce that she had apparently been contemplating trying. She piled it on one bite and downed it. Her face lit up while Tobin laughed and continued talking. Casey tried to cool her tongue with root beer. When hers was gone, she reached across and started drinking Tobin's. Neither of them gave any indication that there was anything to note about this.

A little while in, Tobin jumped. “Oh crap! I have class right now! What am I thinking?”

“What time, six?” Casey asked.

“Oh no, I think it’s at 7:30. I’m OK for right now. I’m sorry; I had a minor freak-out. I hadn’t been to this class yet, that’s why.”

Several weeks later, Tobin would again suggest meeting on a Monday evening. I said, “Tobin, don’t you have class?”

“Oh yeah.”

I first met Tobin and Casey several months earlier, at Champions for Christ, a Christian fellowship gathering for athletes in the spring of 2009. It was my first year as a journalism graduate student in Chapel Hill. I was running on the track team, and one of my teammates had invited me to Champions. A similar invitation from another teammate in the fall had led me to The Summit Church, one of the hot draws for the college crowd on Sunday mornings. There was a dynamic sermon, excellent music and slick technology. I never went back.

It took a long time, several months, for me to finally try Champions. It’s not that I didn’t believe; I was disillusioned with the whole church scene. Everything seemed fake: the spectacle, the apathy, and the hypocrisy. I felt too great a divide between places like Summit, where all I saw were rows of bored, well-dressed white people watching the performance onstage, and my idyllic visions of what it would have been like to join the ragtag nobodies walking with Jesus.

I hadn't regularly attended formal church services in years, so while I knew Champions wouldn't have the same display as a megachurch, I fully expected it to be boring, shallow and awkward.

I walked in as the meeting was getting started. The room was about 10 times too big for its inhabitants, who were sprinkled across couches and folding chairs. Casey and Tobin went to the front after the leader, Charles Kiefer, introduced them. I had no idea who they were. I had been to a couple of the women's soccer games in the fall, and I was definitely impressed with the team, but I didn't know any of the players or how good they were. Over and over again I had run laps around the track where boards painted Carolina blue with white writing announced the year of each national championship. I remember noticing those boards, impressed, but it still didn't register. I didn't know they had won 20 out of a possible 28 national championships. I didn't know that Carolina's women's soccer could make a strong argument for being the most dominant team in any college sport ever, and perhaps in any other elite sports league as well. I didn't know any of the names or faces, so I didn't know that Tobin had an Olympic gold medal, or that Casey had been a near-unanimous selection for national player of the year.

I didn't know any of that, but that wouldn't have caught my attention anyway. I had been around successful athletes before. As an undergraduate, I ran three years for Arizona State University. On my team, in workouts, in the training room, in the weight room, in study hall, and in classes, I rubbed shoulders with All-Americans, national champions, Olympians and first-round draft picks from all the major sports. One of the first people I met was a diver from Finland who had been to the Olympics before his freshman year.

Success itself wasn't going to catch my attention. I'd seen success. I knew that the best weren't all that different from the rest of us. Perhaps they had a bit more talent. Perhaps the breaks had all gone their way. Perhaps they had worked a bit harder. I knew that whatever it was that had brought them to another level, it certainly wouldn't guarantee that they'd be better people. But something caught my attention when Casey and Tobin spoke, and it wasn't their success because I didn't know about it. They were simply talking about their recent spring break mission trip to Jamaica. There was nothing unusual about the stories they told or the Bible verses they weaved into their talk. They weren't particularly eloquent. There was no fantastic theological insight or miraculous spiritual breakthrough. They had prepared to speak, but they definitely hadn't hammered out the kinks. They wore casual, uninteresting clothes: loose-fitting shorts and t-shirts, sandals, and hair to match. No makeup. Everything about their presentation was casual.

I can't pinpoint what it was about them that made me so interested in finding out more about Casey and Tobin, but there was something charismatic about how they carried themselves; how they related to each other; and how they were serious about their faith, but so thoroughly relaxed at the same time. Whatever it was, I was hooked. If I would have gone to any other Champions meeting, I likely would have shrugged and left and not gone back. Instead, I became a regular. I never became a big fan of the meetings themselves, but the community fascinated me. At the end of each meeting I would hang around and watch the groups interact, listen in to their conversations, and try to figure out what it was about this group. Ragtag nobodies hanging with Jesus? It wasn't just Casey and Tobin, although they were at the center of it. Several soccer players were part of the core group.

At one of the meetings that spring, there was a guest speaker named Reggie Roberson who had gone to Jamaica with Casey and Tobin. He was a leader from a similar ministry at Duke and North Carolina Central University. Speaking with confidence and passion, he made it clear he was obsessed with Jesus. After the meeting, a group of mostly women, including a core of soccer players, gathered around him and fired questions. Everything they asked was about the Holy Spirit. Nikki was at the center. For the first time, I saw her clenched forehead, desperately trying to understand. Like many of the women, Nikki had just had overwhelming experiences with the Holy Spirit. Casey and Tobin had started this trend when they came back from Jamaica reporting radical encounters with the Holy Spirit. Their excitement was contagious, and it was ripping through Champions.

Champions grew out of King's Park International Church, a local megachurch that embraces the idea of "baptism of the Holy Spirit." Kiefer and Roberson, both from King's Park, believe that the Holy Spirit moves in people and empowers them to perform various signs like healing, speaking in tongues, and prophesying. They always emphasize encouragement and love, and that God can speak into people's lives through these signs. At group meetings like Champions, however, they are careful to not place too much emphasis on these kinds of signs, because they know signs can become distractions. Nikki had just discovered the Holy Spirit, and she knew Kiefer and Roberson believed in the same things. Too often, Christianity was talked about but not experienced: why were they being shy about it? Didn't they want everyone to experience it as well? Nikki never shied away from intense questions, whether directed at church leaders or referees.

A freshman named Zach came to the first regular Champions meeting of the 2009 school year on campus, after the second weekend of soccer games. Champions is directed at UNC varsity athletes, but other students like Zach are welcomed. The meetings had been in the athletic academic center the year before, but now they were in the soccer center, nicknamed “The Castle,” right next to the soccer field. Perhaps the location was just coincidence, but it seemed to reflect the composition of the group.

Just three days before, the UNC women had played the University of Central Florida. Zach had been at the front of the student section, clearly loving the attention of the audience. Classes had just begun, but he had already built a reputation by meeting everyone he could and memorizing all their names. He was working to learn the names of everyone in his dorm, and he quickly had the names of everyone in the student section. He stood at the front of the bleachers, almost always with his back turned to the game.

Only a UNC student for a week, he was now leading cheers, the favorite at soccer games being, “Stick it in, stick it in!” especially during corner kicks. Augmented by hip thrusts. After goals, Zach would sprint up and down the walkway, almost slamming into the young soccer girls who couldn’t sit still to watch the game. He didn’t actually see the goals because he wasn’t looking. He wasn’t watching when Tobin had an amazing goal, finishing a long cross by sliding on her knees so she could head it just inside the goalpost. Zach tried to get the phone number of an attractive young woman in the stands; he was oblivious to the displeased expression on the face of a much quieter young man sitting next to her.

Normally there was a large gap between the fan experience and the real world of the soccer players, but Zach was trying to bridge it. At Champions, the story had gotten around that Zach was blind in one eye. The story had also gotten around that Zach had tried out and made the men's varsity soccer team but hadn't been allowed to join because of his eye. That second story was not actually true, which would prove to be a problem for Zach's credibility.

A significant portion of the Champions crowd had been praying for a spiritual explosion on campus all summer. The excitement had been building since Casey and Tobin had come back from Jamaica, and it was still building as school started. People were anxious to see God do something. Zach's eye was the perfect opportunity.

A group gathered outside immediately after Champions. Three days before, one felt she had received a message from God that she would see the glory of God in three days. Another had had a dream about God healing a young black man with short hair—like Zach.

“Does anyone mind if we pray in tongues?”

No one objected, so the praying began as a quiet hum of unintelligible sounds, but it built quickly. One by one, members of the group would speak a clear, vocal prayer.

“God, we believe that you are the great healer.”

“Father, show us your glory!”

“Holy Spirit, come.”

“In the name of Jesus, we ask you to heal Zach's eye.”

“Thank you, Lord, for what you are going to do tonight.”

They took turns placing their hands on Zach and praying, over and over again. A few of the soccer players were standing and praying with the group, including Tobin. Casey walked by after it had started with her boyfriend, also a soccer player on the UNC men's team, and didn't stop.

A man in his mid-20s, the de facto leader of the group, went up to Tobin and whispered in her ear. She was part of the prayers, but it was not her way to be assertive. Under his prompting, she moved toward Zach, reached up, and spoke with authority, "Spirit of blindness, I command you in the name of Jesus to come out!" She pushed on his forehead as she spoke.

After numerous prayers and different attempts the volume gradually died down. The anticipation continued to build. Someone asked Zach to open his eye and test his sight.

"Can you see anything?"

He hesitated. The anticipation had been building and building, and the expectation for a miracle was overwhelming. All the pressure was now on Zach.

"I...I think I can see a little bit."

"Same as before, or more?"

Pause. "I think...more."

"Thank you, Jesus!"

"Sometimes it's gradual. It'll get better and better."

Keeping his good eye closed, Zach pointed out across the soccer field. "I think I see the tree line." He was obviously pointing well above any trees. Someone laughed.

"Wait, I think I'm getting a vision."

“No skeptics here.”

Zach kept staring intently at the would-be tree line with his good eye closed. He soon added a cross, a blinding light, someone kneeling at the cross, and then a white man in his 20s who was going to lead a revolution on campus in the coming year.

“Hallelujah!”

The group launched into thanksgiving prayers for the miracle that had just taken place. No skeptics there.

The next day in “The Pit,” the campus hotspot, several from the group that had prayed for Zach started singing along to a guitar, worshipping God. Singing begat dancing, the singing got louder and louder while the dancing got bigger and wilder, and soon The Pit had stopped to watch the spectacle. Zach is a natural, athletic dancer.

News of a miracle was spreading via the Internet, texts and word of mouth, and that brought out the skeptics. Had Zach joined the soccer team now that his eye was supposedly better? Wasn’t he still turning his good eye toward people when he talked to them? More than a week later, questions swirling, a member of the group that had been proclaiming a miracle finally called the men’s soccer coach to ask about Zach. He’d never tried out.

Somewhere, possibilities and hopes had turned to exaggerations, and exaggerations to lies. It’s hard to say where it all began. It’s not hard to imagine Zach playing excellent soccer; his athleticism was clearly visible when he ran and danced. Maybe he started by saying he would have been on the soccer team if it weren’t for his eye, someone had taken that too far, and Zach never argued.

Casey and Tobin never felt right about that evening. Tobin went home and told Casey that it had been weird. Casey had walked by without stopping because she was uncomfortable when she heard people speaking in tongues so loudly. She didn't think it was the right environment; it could become a distraction. Casey is sensitive to people's feelings, and she thought that this could make people uncomfortable. She never believed there had been a miracle that night. She talked to her boyfriend, a soccer player, so she knew that Zach had not been on the team.

This was nothing like Casey and Tobin's experiences in Jamaica, and nothing like the Christianity they had been proclaiming and living out since their mission trip. They went to Jamaica with Roberson, Kiefer, and his wife, Tiffany, who encouraged them to just talk to people about Jesus. They felt completely inadequate, but were stunned to find that it wasn't so hard. "God told us what to say," Casey said.

The trip became a chance to step into the unknown and trust God, as well as a chance to rub shoulders with Christian leaders like Roberson and the Kiefers. Casey had been a Christian for less than two years—she became a Christian after spending a summer living with Tobin's family—and the close interactions with people who were strong in their faith deeply impacted her. Roberson explained things like baptism of the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues in ways that made sense. A year before, Casey and Tobin had felt completely uncomfortable when they first witnessed lots of people speaking in tongues at Campus Harvest, a huge conference through King's Park. "We were so freaked out," Casey said. "We were like, 'What is going on?'" In Jamaica, they had a chance to process through their doubts with a smaller group of people they trusted who prayed in tongues frequently. At one point they gathered a group of the Jamaicans

they had been talking to about Jesus, and Roberson taught about the Holy Spirit. At the end, the people who had come with Casey and Tobin started praying over some of the Jamaicans to be baptized in the Holy Spirit and speak in tongues. Casey and Tobin hadn't been baptized in the Holy Spirit yet, so they just stood and watched, but Tobin had been praying a lot about it. She went up to Roberson and said, "I really want to speak in tongues."

"Oh, that's easy." He put his hand on her and started praying. Tobin started shaking, and then there was an outburst of tongues. For Casey, it started another time when they were holding hands in a circle together. "Everyone was praying out loud, praying in tongues, and I just felt the Holy Spirit there."

They came back from Jamaica ecstatic about everything they had experienced, and they tried to replicate it. They wanted to experience that same depth, passion and community every day. They started going around campus talking to people about Jesus. They told their roommates—Nikki and Ali from the team, Callie Pottinger from track, and Riley Foster from field hockey—about being baptized in the Holy Spirit. At first, the reaction was hostile. Casey and Tobin tried to explain what they had experienced, and then they had Roberson come over and talk to the group. Eventually, everyone came on board. Following Jesus is the most important thing in the world to them, and they view it as so much more than a belief system. They believe God is deeply involved in every part of life.

The whole group became "on fire for God" and united in the effort to "live for God" and "seek his presence all the time." Their enthusiasm didn't wane over the summer and into the fall soccer season, their last together. One by one, Nikki, Ali, and

Casey had become Christians after Tobin had renewed her commitment to Jesus during her freshman year. This new enthusiasm from Jamaica wasn't a radical shift from where they had been before, but there was now another level of commitment. They were a piecemeal bunch: Ali, a blond surfer from Southern California; Tobin, from soccer hotbed New Jersey; Nikki, a Texan who might have instead become the women's version of Jerry Rice if the WNFL existed; and Casey, whose father played professional soccer, and who moved from Wisconsin to North Carolina with her mother and graduated high school early just to become a Tar Heel.

Those four, Callie and Riley moved into a house for their last year together where they wanted to live like the early Christian community, sharing everything, talking about Jesus, and praying together all the time. They wanted the house to be a place where people would feel welcome any time, where people would encounter Jesus.

Chapter 3

Ordained

The team's most important road trip of the early season was Sept. 4 through Sept. 6 at Notre Dame. UNC played Notre Dame on Friday and Marquette on Sunday, both at Notre Dame's brand new stadium, Alumni Stadium, built especially for soccer. Notre Dame's women had grown into UNC's greatest rivals, at least for Tobin and Casey's class. The year before, in 2008, the Fighting Irish handed the Tar Heels their only loss of the season, 1-0 at Fetzer Stadium. The teams had met again in the national championship game. UNC came back from an early 1-0 deficit when Casey scored twice in the second half. She scored the game-winner with 2 minutes, 6 seconds left in regulation. In 2006, Casey and Tobin's first year with Carolina, the two teams also met in the national championship game, and the Tar Heels won 2-1 as well. Casey assisted on one of the goals and scored the other. For each of the last five games between Carolina and Notre Dame, the winning margin was one goal.

Now the teams were ranked No. 1 and No. 2 in the nation; many had anointed Notre Dame as the team that could dethrone Carolina. The Irish were riding a 30-game regular-season winning streak, a 27-game home winning streak and a 54-game goal-scoring streak. The construction of Alumni Stadium had just been completed in time for this game—the Irish had already played two home games, but on their old field. They would christen their state-of-the-art facility against the Tar Heels.

This game rode the wings of a century of transcendent meaning in sports at Notre Dame. The line dividing religion and athletics blurs in South Bend, Ind., where a football game is not just a football game, it's a symbolical reflection on the state of American Catholicism. Notre Dame football has played perhaps the largest role of any program in the United States in creating a culture of sports obsession, where the actual, literal meaning of the game is buried under a mountain of illusions of meaning by a community that follows its team, well, religiously. Waves of fans feel the emotion of every play, physically experiencing the games from the stands or TV as if the outcome truly impacts their lives. They personally identify with the team and its players. The 2009 version of "The Shirt," an annual t-shirt designed to fundraise and unite the crowd, says "Defend Our Honor" in large letters on the back. Depending on one's perspective, football and Mass are either rivals or partners; comparing daily conversations, emotional investment and attendance records between the two among the Notre Dame faithful might make the less athletically obsessed Catholic cringe.

The Friday night soccer game served as a precursor to the football team's home opener the next day against Nevada. Notre Dame distributes a "Gridiron Guide" for its football visitors that packages each game as a three-day experience. On this particular weekend, women's soccer provided the Friday night highlight. Many football fans come into town on Friday to take part in a litany of rituals that extend through Sunday Mass. They visit sacred sites, whether that means the football field, newly opened in 2009 for fans on Fridays; the candlelit Grotto; the Basilica, which has two Mass times on Friday, three on Sunday and one on Saturday 30 minutes after the football game (all listed in the

Gridiron Guide); or Touchdown Jesus, the enormous mural that looms over the stadium showing Jesus with his arms raised as if signaling for a touchdown.

Although Saturday's football game wouldn't begin until 3:30 p.m., at 6 a.m. parking attendants were already out around campus and in neighboring lots, fields and schools. Fans dressed in blue, green and gold started to trickle in before 7, then pour soon after. Huge banners stretched across the dormitory walls. More than 40 shirtless young men, heads and bodies painted gold, moved and cheered in unison in front of the stadium. Security had to remove a group of ridiculously dressed students with floatation devices, beach balls and snorkeling gear making waves in the reflection pool in front of Touchdown Jesus. Firefighters came to clean up an unidentified white powder, probably the same powder that caused a fountain to overflow with bubbles. Fathers and sons dressed in football jerseys, ball caps removed, knelt in front of the candlelit Grotto to pray. Numerous campus groups started cooking, advertising with posters and calling to everyone who passed their tables to raise funds or proclaim their cause. A salesman in priestly garb set up his display of Rosaries and other religious symbols. Tailgaters began tossing footballs and beanbags. "Defend Our Honor" shouted from the back of hundreds, soon to be thousands, of fans.

It was not yet 9 a.m.

The football hype had spilled over onto the soccer field the night before. One of the most important aspects of a state-of-the-art soccer stadium in the U.S. is that it's small; empty seats don't improve the atmosphere. But Alumni Stadium's christening had the most storied program in the nation coming to town, revenge motivation from the last national championship game, a beautiful virgin stadium, the No. 1 vs. No. 2 matchup

announced on a painted sign outside the gate, perfect conditions at sunset and thousands of the most devoted sports fans in the nation in town for the next day's football home opener. Fans were lined up at the gates before the game and throughout the first half, even as the seating areas grew too crowded to let any more people in. They filled the seats first and then spilled out around the edges of the field. Some trespassed into the construction zone outside one side of the fence until they were chased away. Others waited at the gate until halftime, when standard protocol is to let fans in free. Thousands of excited, tightly packed fans, one with face and torso completely covered in green and gold paint, a full cheerleading squad with pompons and bullhorns, a leprechaun mascot. Unlike Fetzer, where the UNC women play, this stadium fits. Everything—the entrance gates, the teams' sheltered benches, the immaculate grass, the raised stands and the sharp-looking scoreboard—is perfect. Stadium lights are magical anywhere, but in South Bend, Ind., you'd swear they were blessed by God. This game had been ordained.

Casey and Tobin flew up the left side; Casey found Tobin with space in front of Notre Dame's back line; Tobin crossed it just before she reached the end line in the left corner; Tobin's cross found Courtney five yards out for a header: goal. Just 23 seconds into the match, and it was 1-0. Six minutes later, Casey stole the goalie's clearance, dribbled quickly into the penalty area drawing the defense and the goalie's attention and then tapped the ball to a wide-open Jessica McDonald. Jess finished into an empty net. 2-0. The Tar Heels continued to pressure the Irish, especially goalie Kelsey Lysander. Lysander had to make four saves in the next few minutes to keep it 2-0. UNC fired seven more shots and drew four corner kicks before scoring again at 19:18 into the game. Nikki

crossed from the right to Meghan Klingenberg by the left post, Kling slipped the ball inside the post, and Lysander dove too late. The rout was on.

At halftime fans were still streaming in whenever the gate attendant let them, but by then other disheartened fans had started streaming out. UNC led 4-0.

Casey scored on Carolina's first shot of the second half, a sharp volley from the top of the box after a Notre Dame defender tried to clear the ball with a header. The final tally was 6-0 after Jess scored one more. Anson brought in 11 players off the bench. Five different Tar Heels scored goals, and Jess scored twice. Notre Dame gave up 12 total goals in 23 games throughout the rest of the season and never again more than two goals in a game.

This was about as perfect as soccer can be played.

As reigning national champions with almost all of the starters returning, the Tar Heels' No. 1 preseason ranking was no surprise. What was a surprise, however, was how they dismantled some of the best teams in the country. It might have been possible to count off either their 7-2 thrashing of UCLA or their 6-0 destruction of Notre Dame as an anomaly, but not both. Three of their first four opponents would eventually land in the top 10 of the RPI (Ratings Percentage Index, a ranking system based on a team's record and strength of schedule). UNC beat those teams by a combined score of 17-2. If they stayed focused and played like they had against UCLA and Notre Dame, the Tar Heels seemed invincible.

There were doubters. A photographer who had been following the team for years didn't think they had it in them to win the NCAA championship. He'd seen teams from

previous years, with leaders like Heather O'Reilly and Yael Averbuch. This team didn't have the same competitive edge. While not captains or vocal leaders, Casey and Tobin heavily influence the tone on the team, and they are much more relaxed and carefree than stars of UNC's past. Mia Hamm, the icon of Carolina and U.S. women's soccer, was famous for her unrelenting intensity. A 1990 photo shows Hamm being supported by UNC teammates Kristine Lilly and Linda Hamilton, exhausted and in tears after a dramatic overtime victory. In a defining moment for women's sports, Hamm landed in a Gatorade commercial in 1999 in which she competes one-on-one with Michael Jordan in a variety of sports. "Anything you can do, I can do better..." plays in the background and closes with a woman screaming, "Yes I can!" after Hamm throws Jordan to the ground with a judo move.

For Casey and Tobin, soccer is certainly about competition, but it's more about fun, teammates and the art of the game. Incredulous, they watched a team they'd just defeated break down in tears. They couldn't imagine reacting like that to a loss.

As freshmen in 2006, Casey and Tobin arrived late to start the season after playing with the U.S. Under-20 National Team in Russia. They missed Anson's early season speeches and explanations for how he runs practice, his "Competitive Cauldron." Tobin and Casey would just as soon scrimmage all the time, but Anson's practices are tightly structured and competitive, and coaches record the results of every drill.

"We thought everyone was brainwashed when we got here," Tobin says. "Everyone had already bought into this philosophy—they'd been there at least a month before us—learning all this. We thought everyone was crazy. We're like, 'they don't

understand how to play soccer.”” Because of their mutual frustrations, Tobin and Casey turned to each other.

They first met when they traveled to Brazil with the U.S. Under-16 National Team. Casey was 14, and Tobin was 15. “I knew in my head we’d be best friends later,” Casey said. “I didn’t know why, but I was like, ‘This girl’s gonna be my best friend.’ I wrote it in my journal when I was 14. And we didn’t really become best friends until freshman year.”

Tobin started for the Tar Heels immediately when she arrived on campus, but Casey didn’t start a single game that season until the national final—in which she had an assist and a goal in a 2-1 victory against Notre Dame. She earned the start by scoring the game-winner in the semifinal against UCLA.

Casey cemented her legend in 2008 when she led the nation with 25 goals. Jess recalls being on the field across from Casey. Jess crossed the ball to Casey, and then stopped to watch. When telling the story, Jess acted as if she had completely stopped playing: she stood up straight, crossed her arms, rested her chin in her hand, and said, “This is going to be good.” Then Casey scored.

Casey is an enigma who drives Carolina fanatics crazy, both for what she does right and for what she fails to do. She scores spectacular goals, toys with defenders with creative moves, and then doesn’t chase down a ball she might have been able to get. Anson has never figured out how to make her play the style that he demands of all his players: all out, all the time. That was his style as a player, and that’s been the characteristic mentality of the UNC women’s soccer program since Anson was hired as the team’s first head coach in 1979.

Anson says that Casey doesn't have the "switch" that players like Tobin and Nikki have. Though relaxed off the field, they can always flip that switch in games and play with the necessary intensity. Some fans say that though Casey is probably the most talented player in the country, she's ultimately a disappointment because she doesn't stay motivated. One moment, she's the best player on the field. Next moment, she's on the bench for not playing hard enough.

Between their Friday night game against Notre Dame and Sunday game against Marquette, the women had a light practice and lots of time for goofing off, games, TV, and homework. Casey, Tobin and a few others clogged the hotel hall with their board game, Settlers of Catan, along with bags of snacks and Gatorade. Ali shuffled out barefoot with her hemp ankle bracelet, black woven cross necklace and tie-dye shirt. The necklace was a gift from Casey, who had made it to look like a Rosary. Ali looked like she'd been at war with textbooks. With glazed eyes under her glasses and a tired smile, she admitted that she'd finished her homework for the weekend. Casey looked down, muttering about the homework she hadn't been doing all day.

Earlier, Casey had been called out for suggesting that she'd been busy with homework. "Did you tell them you were doing homework?" Tobin laughed at her.

Casey was quick to defend herself. "I didn't say *I* was doing homework." She had had every intention of getting some work done, but see, there had been...distractions. There was too much fun to be had.

Casey needs her kinesthetic fixes, and she gets them anywhere and everywhere. Painting, dancing, guitar, skateboarding and any type of competition ever always now.

When she saw a motorcycle, she was drawn to it like a moth to a flame. “I want one so bad,” distinct longing in her voice. That time, Ali started mothering immediately, trying to explain “what’s good for her” and hoping to convince Casey that she most definitely did not need a motorcycle: “You already have a scooter. *And* an electric guitar.”

Need? “Need” was never part of the equation. Casey’s approach to life rarely emphasizes the practical. Like everything she loves, soccer is about art. Every touch on the ball is an aesthetic experience. The cover of the 2009 Tar Heels’ media guide shows all nine players in their last year of eligibility. The photos are all competition shots, and eight of the women have the intensity of battle imprinted on their faces. Whitney Engen in particular looks like she’s at war. Whit’s wrinkled brow, locked jaw, clenched fists, broken arm, wrapped knee, and powerful stride combine to form an intimidating package. Then there’s Casey. It’s almost too perfect. She looks like she’s running with purpose, but her face is caricatured with fun. She’s licking her lips, savoring the moment before the first delicious touch on the ball.

Most of the time, Casey’s face reveals nothing. If she’s happy, sad, frustrated, or deep in thought, she has the same blank expression. At key moments, however, when there’s a burst of excitement, her face lights up with a cross between joy and mischief. It might be sparked by anything from hot sauce to a soccer ball. In the middle of Anson’s pre-game speeches, she always looks checked out until something grabs her. One time she had a wad of tape that she had to throw away while Anson was talking. Her face lit up with the excitement of launching it across the room. Once it was gone, her face went blank again.

“A lot of people *say* they’re free spirits,” says teammate Meghan Klingenberg.
“Casey is the only truly free spirit I’ve ever met.”

Housemate Callie, who has been close friends with the soccer players since all the women were freshmen, walked into a room where Casey was by herself with music on, dancing away. She kept dancing when Callie walked in. Casey dances in the locker room, on the field, by herself, or on camera: it doesn’t matter who is watching. She’s in her own world. Callie tried to describe what it’s sometimes like to have a conversation with Casey, imitating Casey’s slow, expressionless monotone.

“How are you doing?”

“I walked my cat today. It was fun. I saw a butterfly. I thought, ‘It’d be really cool if I had a butterfly.’ But I don’t. Then I got hungry. So I ate at Qdoba. Nikki was there. So that was good.”

“That’s nice, Case. So, how’s life?”

“Life’s good. God’s good. I love Jesus. No real struggles lately. No challenges.”

Casey and Tobin went to Barnes & Noble before the board game in the hotel hallway. One of the board game participants, student manager Barkley Minton, asked Tobin about it. “You read a lot, don’t you?”

“Just being in a bookstore makes me happy.” Tobin is the reader, while Casey is the artist. “Casey, when she gets in an art store, she gets really nervous,” Tobin said.

Nervous? Casey looked up with her mischievous face. “I have to pee.” Then her face went blank again.

Both women are competitors and artists through and through, but Tobin tips the scale a little more toward the competition side of things. While Casey lounged on her side throughout their game, Tobin sat up, Indian-style, often leaning forward over the board.

“I like how fast this game is going,” Casey said, hardly the patient type. The night before they had played with Whit and her parents, who were “so slow. That’s ‘cause they’re good, and they like, think about it.”

Tobin tried to get someone, anyone, to trade cards: “Brick for an ore?”

There was a collective “Nope” from the group.

“Really?” Tobin smiled. “Not even a little bit?” Tobin and Casey were the only ones consistently trying to convince people to trade, but they were also the most reluctant to trade for another’s betterment.

Casey loves to compete, but even competition is more about the aesthetics of the thing than winning and losing. When Tobin asked, “Is everyone remembering to keep track of their points?” Casey hadn’t been.

“Oh, I forgot.” After a few moments of tabulating, she added (completely nonchalantly), “Oh, I won.”

The group split up to go to different restaurants for dinner that night, and Casey and Tobin ended up at a big table at Olive Garden where they ordered significantly more food than they could eat. Normally they’re supposed to order only water to drink, but one of the players, while texting, explained that she was asking the coach if they could order strawberry lemonade. “Can you text and talk at the same time?” Tobin asked. “That’s really impressive. I totally can’t.” The whole table was ecstatic when they received the

green light from the coach for strawberry lemonade as a reward for their victory over Notre Dame.

Tobin has no sense of ownership. At Olive Garden she was wearing a teammate's t-shirt and another teammate's sweatshirt, which was completely normal for her. One time while I was at their house, Tobin reached into a side pocket on my backpack and started eating out of a bag of almonds. Callie and I have matching bags from running on the track team, so she had thought the bag was Callie's. When the drinks came, Tobin noticed that teammate Maria Lubrano didn't have one. "Do you want one?" and without a moment's pause she added, "You can have mine," and she pushed hers toward Maria. Tobin was surprised to find out that Maria hadn't ordered one.

While waiting for food, Tobin pointed at the fruit hanging over the table. "I wish those were real grapes."

Casey said, "I'd climb up and bite them." Casey was looking for something, anything for excitement, so she started a game with sugar packets, Gatorade packets and straws. She quickly tired of it when she was losing. When breadsticks arrived, she asked Tobin: "You want to have a breadstick-eating competition?"

"No. Not at all."

One of the players said, "Did you know that each of these breadsticks has like 200 calories?"

Tobin said, "Wonderful!" and dipped a breadstick in cheesy sauce and took a huge bite.

The women would often sarcastically tease each other when one of them needed help. Whenever they teased, though, they would immediately begin helping. Once when Ali was walking out the door to leave for a team roadtrip, her arms were loaded down with extra decorations and gag items meant for goofy pre-game rituals she'd planned. She couldn't carry everything, so she left a bag sitting in the kitchen. Casey followed after her, saw the bag and said, "Sure, Ali, I'll carry your stuff," as she reached down to pick it up.

With her mouth full, Casey pointed at the bowl of cheese sauce in front of Tobin as if demanding that Tobin pass it her way. "Use your words," Tobin teased, as she picked up the cheese sauce to pass it to Casey.

Sophomore Merritt Mathias should have known she was in trouble as soon as she sat between Casey and Tobin. First, Tobin tried to convince her to shove a whole breadstick in her mouth. "You can totally do it, Merrill." Tobin had started calling her Merrill instead of Merritt on accident and then just kept doing it anyway.

"You're just trying to make me do it."

"No, I really think you can do it." Tobin looked away with laughter behind her smile.

The waitress started passing food around the table. "Tour of Italy?" Asked the waitress. Tobin raised her hand. "Cheese?" Tobin awkwardly put her hand down, clearly confused. "Do you want cheese on it?"

"Oh, yes please!"

After the food came and the only sounds were utensil on utensil, Tobin said, “Notice, everyone stops talking when the food comes.”

“That’s how our team works.”

The waitress asked Merritt to hand her one of the bigger, heavier plates. She then noticed that Merritt’s left arm was in a cast and said to forget about it. With new resolve, Merritt insisted she could lift the plate, and handed her the plate with just her right hand. She said, “I’m getting strong with this arm,” and raised her arm, flexing her bicep.

Tobin laughed and imitated Merritt by flexing, saying, “You’re flexing for the waitress.” Her left arm was comically skinny compared to Merritt’s.

Merritt had to get up to take a phone call soon after the food came. Tobin and Casey pounced. They separated Merritt’s food onto a few extra bread plates. Everyone else helped spread the plates around the table. As large and as full as the table was, the plates were hidden by the clutter. When Merritt came back and saw her empty plate, Tobin looked at her, looked at her plate, and apologized. “Sorry, Merrill. We ate your food.”

Casey looked down. “Yeah, sorry. I was hungry.”

“It was really good, though.” Merritt didn’t mind; she wasn’t hungry after trying to shove a breadstick down her throat a few minutes earlier.

On Sunday Carolina played Marquette, again at Alumni Stadium. Marquette doesn’t have the same historically elite status as Carolina and Notre Dame, but the Golden Eagles would ultimately prove to be one of the best teams in the Big East. They

would go on to win their division and narrowly fall to Notre Dame in the conference championship game.

But on Sept. 6, Marquette was unranked and under the radar, and despite Anson and Dino's best efforts to get the players focused, the Tar Heels felt little of the excitement as they had at Friday night's game. Alumni Stadium had lost its magic: it was a midday game without stadium lights, without the No. 1 vs. No. 2 luster, without cheerleaders and leprechauns and body paint, without fans cramming the stands and surrounding the field. Under the bright lights it feels like a stage, as though nothing else matters—the rest of the world is blacked out. Under gray skies everything is gray. Since this wasn't a home game for either team, the stands were sparsely populated with family members and few others. Notre Dame would play afterward in front of a much larger crowd that was still less than half the size of Friday's crowd.

Marquette's team is as full of goofballs and ridiculousness as Carolina's, as evidenced by the obsession with dancing and the garden gnome standing beside the players on the sideline throughout the game. But this team also believes it belongs on the same field as Carolina, and they showed it, pushing back and thwarting every attack. The Tar Heels managed to take just seven shots in the first half, and only two on target.

Marquette saved both.

Goalies have the best vantage point to see plays develop, and they're also the ones who take the most blame for any goals that go past them, so they play the role of field general. All year, whenever Casey touched the ball anywhere near the box, goalies would scream, "NO SHOT! NO SHOT!" They all knew that their best, perhaps only, chance to stop Casey's powerful shot is to prevent her from taking one. Marquette players hounded

her in the first half; she only took one shot. Anson pulled her aside to encourage her at halftime. “Everyone gets up to play against Casey Nogueira. Everyone wants to shut down the national player of the year.” He told her to stay focused and keep playing within the system, and eventually chances would open up. The heavy emphasis teams placed on shutting down Casey would create space for easy scores for her teammates.

On this day, Casey’s replacement would ultimately score the winning goal. Freshman Alyssa Rich had an impressive strike into the upper right corner from just outside the box off a pass from Tobin. Alyssa, from Cincinnati, Ohio, was much closer to family and friends than normal, and a small crowd had come to watch her play. She gave them a show. Carolina won 1-0.

The Tar Heels would continue to prove throughout the season that they played their best soccer under the brightest lights. The tougher the opponent, the bigger the stage and the more likely Carolina would dominate, especially if it the rest of the world was blacked out by stadium lights.

Chapter 4

Oh How He Loves Us

Nikki struggled with injuries throughout her college career. She also missed time playing with the U.S. Under-20 National Team, including the NCAA tournament in 2008. Ali says that Carolina never saw Nikki at her best because of the time she missed and because she was playing injured.

When the Tar Heels played LSU in mid-September, they were 6-0. Against their two weakest opponents, they had won 1-0. Against the other four, all eventual top-25 teams according to RPI, they had averaged better than a four-goal differential. The game before, Nikki scored her second game-winner of the season against No. 13 Texas A&M. Nikki, Ali, Tobin, and Casey couldn't have been riding much higher.

The score was 0-0 after half. Nikki thought to herself, "It's not going to be one of these games, where we should be winning and we're not." Nikki still knew they would win. They had an 11-2 edge in shots. If that continued, it was only a matter of time before one went in.

Just five minutes into the second half, Nikki raced up the side of the field and cut the corner to make a cross. The defender was tightly guarding her and may have bumped her, but it was nothing unusual. It was a cut she'd made thousands of times before, without incident. This time, for no obvious reason, her knee couldn't take the pressure, and it tore.

When Ali saw Nikki go down, she didn't think it was her ACL. That wasn't an option. Ali had missed the 2007 season because of a torn ACL. She had talked to doctors about what makes people susceptible to the injury, and Nikki didn't fit. Nikki had the strength, balance and body type to prevent that kind of tear. Also, Ali had been through the slow, painful recovery process. She knew that it had taken a full two years to completely bounce back to where she had been before the injury. That was unthinkable for Nikki. Not this year, their last together. It would change everything. Nikki was projected to be a first-round draft pick in Women's Professional Soccer (WPS) at the end of the season.

There was no doubt in Nikki's mind. She felt the pop. She cried out with pain and frustration, then asked, "Why, God? Why?" The stadium was silent except for Nikki's cries.

Ali, Casey and Tobin quickly surrounded her along with the trainer and several other teammates. They went to their first instinct—they started praying, right on the field. Eventually, the trainer said, "OK, guys, I've got to get off the field." Nikki left the field with the trainer. She returned to the bench a few minutes later with crutches and ice wrapped around her knee. Anson pulled Ali out of the game, and she went straight to Nikki and hugged her. She tried to comfort her, but before long Ali had to step away from the bench. She sat against the fence, staring straight ahead, no expression.

Ali went back in just a few moments later, and the Tar Heels finally got the winning goal by center forward Jessica McDonald in the 78th minute. Ali needed something tangible to give to Nikki right then, and that goal was all she had. She was on

the far side of the field, and she ran right past the celebration of her teammates, to Nikki. The goal was hardly a fix, though, and Nikki pushed Ali away.

They prayed during the game, they prayed after the game, and that night, they prayed again at Charles and Tiffany Kiefer's house, their leaders from Champions. They all believed that God could heal Nikki, but they also knew that he might not this time. He didn't.

I arrived late to a Champions meeting a few weeks after Nikki's injury. There was a long skateboard sitting just inside McCaskill Soccer Center, nicknamed "The Castle," with a rope attached to it. I thought I'd seen Tobin, or maybe Casey, riding around campus on a skateboard like that, but without the rope. After the meeting, Nikki and Tobin left The Castle. Tobin set the skateboard on the track, and Nikki sat down on it. Tobin threw the rope over her shoulder and ran across the track toward their car, leaving a pile sitting on the track—Nikki's crutches, Tobin's books from class, and a Bible. Callie and Ali came after them, and, without a word about it, picked up the pile. The crutches were shaped like a shepherd's staff, and they joked about being shepherds as they ambled toward Nikki and Tobin. Tobin ran all the way across the track and then sped up when she came to a bump at the parking lot entrance. Tobin shouted at Callie and Ali, jokingly demanding Nikki's crutches.

Nikki could have used a van service on campus for people with handicaps, but she never had to. By car or skateboard, her housemates took her wherever she needed to go, dropping her at the door to each class. Tobin and Casey took care of everything they could, such as constantly bringing her ice. Nikki had been sleeping in an attic up a steep,

awkward stairwell, but Ali switched places with her. Ali had her own room downstairs that was much easier to access, while Nikki shared the attic with Tobin and Casey. They called it “The Upper Room.”

The ceiling in The Upper Room was shaped to the roof, so it sloped down low on either side. At one end, the women had laid all three of their mattresses on the ground side by side, taking up the width of the room. Nikki normally slept on the middle mattress, and Ali found a bag of oreos under the pillow when she switched spots with Nikki. The rest of the long room was cluttered with guitars, skateboards, a snowboard, books, clothes, soccer gear and an oversized beanbag chair. The walls and especially the sloped sides of the ceiling were all colorfully painted. Above the mattresses they had written “WE3” on the wall and “The Upper Room” in big letters on the ceiling. One section of the ceiling had dozens of brightly colored handprints from visitors with their names beside them. The biggest section of the ceiling was thickly painted with mountains, waves, clouds, a hot air balloon, a fish, colorful designs, a huge cross, Bible verses, and words and phrases such as, “joy,” “And my heart burns for you,” and “freedom.” One small section of the wall was painted black and covered with notes and prayers such as, “I love you guys,” “Rain down righteousness,” and “A God who laughs.”

Nikki didn’t like Ali’s room. She was lonely, so in a week, she moved back up to her mattress between Tobin and Casey.

Nikki came out on the field with crutches and bright purple plastic sunglasses when UNC played Auburn. Just two days after LSU, the drugs must have been working, because she was full of smiles. UNC completely outclassed Auburn but couldn’t find the

back of the net. Without Nikki and starting right forward Courtney Jones, who had a minor injury, UNC's attack from the right side was noticeably weakened. Several times, crosses from the left found open space that normally would have been filled by a sprinting Tar Heel. Auburn packed almost everyone back on defense, and after two overtimes, the game ended 0-0. UNC outshot Auburn 40-4.

The next day, Tobin and goalie Ashlyn Harris left for a camp with the full U.S. National Team. Tobin would later miss time again, traveling with the National Team to Germany. In the midst of all the travel, Tobin got sick and missed more playing time. She missed six games in the middle of the season and most of another. Without Tobin and Nikki sprinting everywhere in the midfield, UNC was no longer the same team that crushed UCLA and Notre Dame. In one stretch, they lost three out of five games. Tobin played a combined 23 minutes in those three losses. One more loss, and the team would be making a case for the worst season in UNC history; only once since 1980 had a UNC team lost more than three games in a season.

Whenever Tobin was on the field, teams started marking her. They would put one player whose sole responsibility was to stay with Tobin, sometimes not even watching the ball. If Tobin ran in a circle, so would she. Teams did anything they could to disrupt Tobin's playmaking, and it sometimes frustrated Tobin.

Casey was struggling as well. She felt like she was letting the team down. She scored twice against UCLA and once against Notre Dame, but only once more in the first 16 games of the season. The year before, she averaged almost a goal per game. She couldn't find her flow, and she questioned her desire to play soccer. After Jamaica, her whole life was re-oriented around Jesus. She was having more fun outside of soccer, and

she thought about giving up soccer to devote everything to following Jesus, perhaps as a missionary.

Then Ali hurt her knee, right before the end of the regular season. It wasn't as final as Nikki's injury, but she had to miss a few games, and she was never at full strength for the rest of the season.

The Tar Heels limped into the championship season. For only the fourth time in 22 years, they weren't the first seed in the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) tournament. That honor belonged to Florida State, the only team other than UCLA to score multiple goals against the Tar Heels throughout the regular season. The Seminoles had scored their third goal with 12 seconds left in the second overtime period to beat Carolina.

The Tar Heels battled through the ACC tournament and met Florida State in the finals for a rematch. Tobin was back on the field, and Casey had found her rhythm. She decided she could still devote her life to Jesus while playing soccer. With that and the added excitement of the tournament, she was fired up. She started her dancing routine before the pre-game even started; she was dancing at the front of the room with a pretend microphone as Anson walked into the locker room. She kept going, gesturing at Anson with an open hand as if to say, "Stop" while she kept the microphone going with her other hand. After the pre-game, Casey, Jess and Nikki danced in unison, Nikki trying to keep up despite her brace as the team trickled out onto the field. Casey and Jess were still dancing a few minutes later when everyone else had left.

Casey scored twice in the opening 13 minutes, and the Tar Heels blanked Florida State 3-0 to win UNC's 20th ACC title.

After scoring just four goals in the first 16 games, Casey had nine goals in the final 11 games. She had a hat trick (three goals) in the NCAA quarterfinals against Wake Forest. Then she scored the winning goal in the semifinals against Notre Dame.

For some of the players, the climax of the season took place a few days before the team played for the national championship. Champions held a baptism after the regular meeting in The Castle, two days before the team left for the NCAA Final Four. Before Champions, Nikki took two of the women who were about to be baptized, Barkley Minton, a student manager for the soccer team (who would play for Tar Heels the next year), and Melissa Hayes, a former player for the team, to The Upper Room. Nikki, Barkley and Mel talked and prayed about their decisions. Pre-game to the baptism. There was another pre-game at Champions, where Charles spoke at the front of the same room as Anson does to a room full of soccer players. Nikki sat in the same spot at the front where she sat before a recent home game. After the Champions meeting, they pulled a big plastic tub, normally used for icing sore legs, into the women's soccer team locker room and began filling it with water. As they waited, they turned out the lights and flipped on the music and the rotating disco ball light that splashed different colors around the room. Pre-game dancing. Eventually they turned the lights back on, chatting and singing along with worship music. With several soccer players in the crowd, there was a soccer ball constantly moving around the room. Maria spun the ball on her finger and tried to keep it spinning while passing it to onto Jess's finger. Tobin put on a turtle shell, as if from a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle costume, that the team had used as a prop when they were hyping before a game against the Maryland Terrapins.

When the tub was ready, the Champions crew crammed tightly around it for the baptism. Charles baptized four students. Each of them introduced themselves, but Jess said, “Charles Barkley” as Barkley started to say her name.

Mel is Nikki’s best friend. She was part of the original recruiting class that came to Chapel Hill in 2006, but she didn’t get the playing time that she wanted, so she transferred to Penn State after just one season. Anson understood. He told her that she would always be part of the Tar Heel family. Mel didn’t think much of that comment at first, but four years later she had seen it play out. When she didn’t get her usual playing time one game during her senior year, Anson texted Nikki, asking about Mel. When she came back to Chapel Hill late in the fall to visit, she was welcomed with open arms.

Nikki had been distraught about Mel transferring. Nikki became a Christian while Mel was away on a recruiting visit trying to decide where she would transfer. When Mel came back, Nikki said, “You’ll never believe what just happened...”

Mel came back to spend time with her old teammates, especially Nikki, when her season ended after losing in the second round of the NCAA tournament. She was close with her teammates at Penn State, but the community never matched the intimate group at Carolina. Mel joined in naturally at the house. The night before the baptism, most of the housemates sat around the living room with Mel, talking about how their close group was about to fall apart. They all wanted to know how they could build something like this again in another context. They desperately hoped they would land on some of the same teams in the draft, but each feared she would be alone.

The baptism was full of laughter and hugs. Tobin’s hugs included the turtle shell. Afterward, each person who had been baptized took a turn sitting in a chair in the middle

of the locker room as the rest of the group came in tightly around the chair and prayed. They placed hands on the back, arms, and knees of the person in the middle, women with women and men with men. A tear trickled down Barkley's face as they prayed.

Tobin, Nikki, Ali, Barkley, Mel, Callie and Callie's teammate from track, Marisa Dobbins, stayed there for another hour after the baptism, past midnight. They prayed, danced and sang along to worship songs, closing their eyes and raising their hands.

Oh, how he loves us so;
Oh, how he loves us;
How he loves us so.

Holy, holy, holy;
Is the Lord God almighty;
Who was and is and is to come.

Oh, to you, I surrender;
All of my dreams;
All of me.

As they had so many times before, they gathered around Nikki, placing their hands on her knee. Ali prayed, "Thank you that you have been healing her knee, Father, and right now, we just pray that you'd continue to heal it, Father. And we pray that you'd heal her heart, and that you'd just use this knee however you want, God. And if you want it to be a testimony of your healing power, your miraculous healing power tonight, God, then so be it, God. And if you want it just to be a testimony of how you heal us in general, then so be it, Father. We just pray for your will over this knee. I pray for a peace and a joy to overcome Nikki, and just an assurance to overcome Nikki that she's not only going to come back OK; she's going to come back way better than she ever was, Father,

because you're going to be giving her a new knee, but you're also going to be showing her how to play for you. Lord, her prayer has always been how to give it up to you, God, how to declare your name on the field, Lord, and right now, you're teaching this to her, God. And you're going to teach it to her so well that she can never forget it, Father, and every time she steps foot on a field, she steps foot on a field to run fitness, to touch a soccer ball, anything, God, you're just going to radiate from her, God, and she's going to play for you every moment."

UNC played Stanford for the national championship. Stanford was 25-0 going into the game, averaging more than three goals per game. They'd scored at least twice in all but three games.

The night before the game, Anson insisted that if they applied constant pressure they could take Stanford out of their game. He was right. Less than three minutes into the first half, Tobin sent the ball wide to Casey, who crossed it perfectly to Jess, right in front of the goal. Jess one-touched it into the back of the net. That was all they needed. Stanford never found a rhythm. UNC pressured them all over the field and baited them into two offside traps. Stanford star Kelley O'Hara, who led the nation with 26 goals for the season, only managed to take one shot all game. Obviously frustrated, O'Hara was ejected after picking up her second yellow card late in the second half.

The Tar Heels held onto a 1-0 victory. They celebrated by singing and dancing.

For Casey, Tobin, Nikki and Ali, the victory was bittersweet. It fulfilled the one competitive goal they had for the season, but it was the end of their time together. Things would never be the same.

Casey didn't fly back to Chapel Hill with the team; she went straight to a training camp for the full U.S. National Team in California. Tobin had also been put on the roster for the camp, but she declined to go after her exhausting season. Tobin, Nikki and Casey would all be drafted onto professional soccer teams in just over a month, abandoning The Upper Room.

Epilogue

The next chapter in these women's lives is still being written. After a wildly successful Women's Professional Soccer (WPS) draft in January for the Carolina women, their first professional season was a disappointment. Seven Tar Heels were drafted, including four of the nine picks in the first round. Tobin was the first player selected overall, while Whit, Nikki and Casey went fourth, fifth and eighth respectively. Jess and goalie Ashlyn Harris were selected in the second round, and defender Kristi Eveland was taken in the fourth round.

Due to trades, the Los Angeles Sol had two picks in the first round. The team selected Nikki and Casey, who were thrilled to be together. Just days later, however, the Sol folded and Nikki and Casey were parted in the redraft. Because of her injury and the league's financial struggles, Nikki's contract negotiations floundered. She eventually landed with Ashlyn on Saint Louis Athletica, but the team also folded. After bouncing around a few teams, Nikki finally ended up with the Chicago Red Stars. In Chicago, Nikki happily reunited with Casey as well as Whit and Jess, but things weren't the same as before. Nikki didn't join the team until near the end of the season, she was still regaining strength after her injury, and she only had a contract through the end of the season. She is currently a free agent heading into the 2011 season. Meanwhile Tobin started the season as the face of the Atlanta Beat, but an ankle injury ended her season after just three games.

The league is attempting to add a team in 2011, but two others may have to fold. Unlike the WNBA, the women's soccer league doesn't have the supporting partnership of a financially stable men's league. Without more media coverage and fan support, the league may not survive another year.

UNC reloaded with excellent new players, of course, and Ali went back for her redshirt senior year. Barkley, previously a student manager, joined the roster, and despite limited playing time, assisted on one goal and scored another. The team won the regular season ACC championship, but failed to win the ACC tournament for just the third time in 23 years. Ali missed several games with lingering injuries but recovered and is playing well heading into the NCAA tournament, where the Tar Heels are once again one of four No. 1 seeds.

Often when I was around Nikki, Casey, Tobin and Ali, worship music came on, and eventually Kim Walker's version of "How He Loves" written by John Mark McMillan. They'd memorized not only every word of the song itself but also every word of a concert recording that lasts almost nine minutes. Walker stops singing and talks to the audience for a large portion of the song about how "God wants you to feel his love, his amazing love. Without it, these are just songs, these are just words, these are just instruments. Without the love of God, it's, it's just like we're just up here just making noise, but the love of God changes us, and we're never the same, we're never the same after we encounter the love of God..." Tobin and Nikki would look at each other and speak every word along with Walker, hamming it up with exaggerated motions and facial

expressions. It was one of a million quirky, private jokes that I never quite understood after months of trying to discover what it was about their inner circle that so drew me in.

That song stuck with me. It has played over and over in my head even months later. One of the lines says, “So heaven meets earth like a sloppy wet kiss...” There’s something uncomfortable about those lyrics, something that caused the David Crowder Band, a mainstream conservative Christian group, to change the lyric when they covered the song to, “So heaven meets earth like an unforeseen kiss...” McMillan wrote on his website, “The idea behind the lyric is that the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of earth converge in a way that is both beautiful and awkwardly messy. Think about the birth of a child, or even the death of Jesus himself. These miracles are both incredibly beautiful and incredibly sloppy (‘gory’ may be more realistic, but ‘Heaven meets earth like a gory mess’ didn’t seem to have the same ring).”

There are things about their community that are unconventional—even awkwardly messy—that would make many conservative Christians squirm. But in the midst of awkwardness there was always life and always beauty. I always wished I’d had what they had on their team. I placed so much pressure on myself as an athlete, obsessing over my performances, while they always played free. Tobin once asked me how I would have responded to a reporter who asked her to explain how she deals with all the pressure. The pressure to perform and the pressure to juggle an exhausting athletic schedule with demanding schoolwork: I understood his question. How had I dealt with all that pressure as a college athlete? Poorly. I trained too much, slept too little, underperformed and burned myself out. Tobin had asked me about the reporter’s question as if it was a completely ridiculous question, as if she had no concept of that kind of

pressure. I wish I'd had that perspective, that I had, like Tobin, lived free of the burdens I felt all through my years as a college athlete. I definitely would have enjoyed my time more, and I probably would have performed better as well.

Much more than their perspective, I envied their community. To some extent what they had was probably common to most team sports, and especially women's soccer teams. American culture has yet to wholeheartedly embrace true team sports for women; sports such as tennis, swimming and gymnastics have historically received significantly more media attention and fan support than any team sports. The depth of community and interdependence on the 2009 Carolina soccer team, however, would be impossible in individual sports for which the team's score is the simple summation of several individual efforts rather than the infinitely complex network of a true team that succeeds and fails as a unit. In soccer every player is an essential part of every play; the success of the defenders depends on the pressure and positioning of the forwards, while the success of the forwards depends on the start of the attack from the defense—forwards play defense and defenders play offense. In a competitive world where everyone is completely dependent on everyone else, relationship happens, and it is messy and, hopefully, beautiful.

The community on this Carolina team certainly was beautiful, in a way that was different from other women's soccer teams. There is a culture of family fostered by the coaching staff. As Nikki's best friend Mel discovered even after transferring, everyone who becomes part of the Carolina family is always embraced. The coaches find ways to encourage relationships and keep the team as relaxed and comfortable as possible off the

field. The players first love being together, then playing together and then winning together.

Everyone I talked to, from players to parents to staff to outside observers, said that there was something different about this team, and several players said they'd never experienced anything like this after years of many soccer teams. Many thought it started with the coaches, but most weren't sure where it came from. Tobin, Casey, Nikki and Ali believed they knew. "People are always like, 'I don't know why this team is so great,'" Ali said. "And all of us, we sit there and we know exactly why: God is working on this team. His hand is specifically on this team. And that's why it's so great."

Ali didn't mean "great" the way others might expect. Even though Ali is one of the most driven people I've ever met, she would have said those words even if the team had finished the season as the greatest disappointment in Carolina history. She did not believe the team was "great" because of wins and losses. She believed that the team was great because the community was great. "Probably every practice or every game, there's something that somebody does that is very thoughtful about another player. Somebody will randomly bring somebody some candy, or bake them something that they know they like." That wasn't just between the closest friends on the team but everyone. "It's just the fact that they are thinking about their teammates all the time." She said all this, that God's hand was specifically on the team, in the midst of struggles: Nikki had lost her season to injury, Ali was struggling with injuries threatening to end her season, the team had recently lost three out of five games, and the team had not yet redeemed the season in the NCAA tournament. The season was imperfect and difficult, and being on the team was wild and goofy and frustrating and fun.

It was all messy and beautiful, like a sloppy wet kiss.

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