

Faking it on the soccer field

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Credit: Christopher Bruno

As the U.S. women prepare for a showdown with France in Wednesday's semifinal of the World Cup of soccer, a research group has reported two tantalizing tendencies in the game. Top female soccer players aren't beyond faking injury to deceive referees and gain an advantage over their opponents. But they don't do it as much as their male counterparts.

"It looks like there may be some injury simulation in the women's game," concluded Dr. Daryl Rosenbaum, assistant professor of family and community medicine at Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center in North Carolina who headed the study. "But if you compare it with the men's game, it's half as much."

The fact that women players simulate injuries doesn't surprise Lisa Cole, associate head coach of the Women's Professional Soccer League's

Boston Breakers.

"It comes from getting the referee to make the right call," Cole said. "The best players are getting kicked a lot. But if they don't go down, the referees aren't sophisticated enough to give a foul."

Simulation of injuries is common in top-class men's soccer today. In the 2006 men's World Cup, only half of the apparent injuries that received treatment on the field corresponded to real injuries, according to team physicians.

In a typical scenario, a player falls to the ground after a hard slide tackle, crying out in apparent agony, perhaps rolling over several times, and staying prone. But once the referee has awarded a free kick and possibly a yellow card against the tackler, the "injured" player miraculously recovers, often getting up with a smirk on his face.

FIFA, the Switzerland-based organization that oversees world soccer, expressed concern about the issue in 2008.

It called for the soccer family "to unite in denouncing simulation and working to eradicate this scourge from the game in order to assist the referee's identification of serious injuries and, more generally, to uphold the fundamental principles of fair play and preserve the integrity of the game."

Most of the incidents that sparked FIFA's statement occurred in top-level men's soccer. Last year, Rosenbaum's team reported in the *International Journal of Sports Medicine*, a video study of international men's tournaments on four continents showed a large majority of questionable injuries.

"Only 7.2 percent of apparent injuries met our definition for a 'definite

injury," Rosenbaum said.

Now the same group of researchers has tackled injury simulation in the women's game.

The team studied videos of 47 games from the 2003 and 2007 women's World Cup tournaments.

They chose the same criteria for apparent injuries that they had used for the men's study. "A player had to go to ground, writhing or rolling, grabbing a body part, yelling, having an anguished facial expression, or hiding her face," Rosenbaum said.

To qualify as a definite injury, the team decided that the player would have to experience visible bleeding or leave the field within five minutes of the incident. "All other incidents were labeled as questionable injuries," the team wrote in the journal [Research in Sports Medicine](#).

During the two women's tournaments, the researchers found that only 13.7 percent of the apparent injuries met the criteria for definite injuries. And for the 2007 [World Cup](#), team physicians reported only 2.3 injuries per game, while the video review of players' behavior suggested six apparent injuries in each match. In addition, questionable injuries were associated more than definite injuries with situations that led the referee to penalize the team causing the injury.

"So it looks like there may be some simulation in the women's game," Rosenbaum said. "But this study shows that women are less likely than men to fake soccer injuries."

What might explain the gender differences?

"Men are bigger and faster and playing on same size field as women, so

they experience more contact that can cause immediate contusions but do not require a player to withdraw," Rosenbaum says.

However, he suspects that more cynical reasoning also plays a part in the difference. "The pressures and the money at stake in the men's game are so much higher," he said. "Desperate times call for desperate measures."

Higher stakes can also have a role when women players feign injury. Coach Cole sees more temptation to simulate in the women's professional game than in college soccer. Because of the skills of the players, she said, "a free kick at the professional level is that much more dangerous. Players want those calls more often than not."

Rosenbaum plans to seek more precise answers to the gender question in his next research project.

"I've developed a survey to distribute to elite clubs, professional players, and youth players, which will ask them (anonymously) if they've engaged in the [injury](#) simulation behavior and why," Rosenbaum said.

Meanwhile, [soccer](#) fans can take heart from one conclusion of the study of women [players](#). The researchers found no evidence that teams that simulated injuries more frequently won more often.

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