

## **Interview with Tony DiCicco** **Women's US National Soccer Team Head Coach**

- Gary:** Okay, hi, everyone, this is Gary Christopher with Getfasttoday.com, and I have the pleasure of talking with Tony DiCicco. Tony is the president, founder, and technical director of Soccer Plus Goalkeepers School and Soccer Plus Field Player Academy. Tony is also the former head coach of the U.S. Women's National and Olympic soccer teams, and is also the head coach of the U.S. U-20 Women's National Team. As coach of the U.S. National team, Coach DiCicco's team won the 1996 Olympic Gold Medal and the 1999 Women's World Cup. Following the World Cup in 1999, Tony resigned with an overall record of 103 wins, 8 losses, and 8 ties; at the time, the highest winning percentage in U.S. soccer history. He remains to this day the coach with the most victories all time. Tony, that is an amazing career, and you now are serving as an analyst for NBC, ESPN, and Fox. Congratulations, and thank you very much for your time today.
- Tony:** Thanks, Gary. It's my pleasure to be here. Yeah, when you have good players, you can accomplish some pretty amazing things
- Gary:** You did have some great players, but I know that you also put it all together there, so congratulations on that. Speaking of your successes with the Women's National Team, a couple thoughts to me. You certainly had some talented players, for sure, but are there other things, are there certain things you believe are also needed to help a team have success?
- Tony:** Yeah, of course. When you get your team together at whatever level you are, you want to have a team vision. You can call that goals or whatever I think it's a little bit sexier than goals. It's a team vision of what you want to accomplish. It leads to what your team culture will be. When I coached Women's National Team, our motto, my motto for the players coming into the team, was win forever. Might not be realistic, but we were good. We knew we could compete with anyone, and why would we not try to be champions in every competition we went into?
- That leads to your culture. Once you have a vision, then you got to come up with an action plan on how to achieve that. Part of our culture was fun. We had to have a lot of fun. We had to work hard. We had to be the fittest team on the field. We had to be positive when we were together. Yeah, there's, I think, a bit of hierarchy of things that need to take place and usually do take place for the teams or organizations that consistently are excellent.
- Gary:** I agree, and I look at some of the things. I've had the chance to watch the '99ers, and I've probably watched it several times. It did look like it was a team that had a lot of fun but as you just said, they also worked hard. That's not a mutually exclusive concept, is it?
- Tony:** No, I always say that that team played sport the way Americans want

sport to be played. They played sport with talent. Americans want to see talent. They had a work ethic. They found ways to win. They competed. They played fairly. When they won, they were respectful or they are humble. If they lost, they were respectful. I think that's why America had a love affair with that team.

**Gary:**

That is for sure. That was quite a love affair. One of the things that I do, as I mentioned, I work with a lot of young players, mostly in the side of speed, and agility, and some strength. As a soccer coach, I do try and teach some of the values of playing the sport and playing it the right way. Are there some things that you see in some of the academies that you have and the training that you do now that, in your opinion, some youth soccer players need to be looking at doing more of or less of? How can our youth players get better, and what're some of the things they might be able to do, in your opinion?

**Tony:**

Yeah, that's a great question, Gary. I mean, both on the boys' side and the girls' side, we need to be more technical. We're not a technical country. Yeah, we have players that have some flair with the ball, but when you compare them at the same age group with players in Europe, South America, Asia, we're behind technically. We just need to be able to master the ball. Unfortunately, many of our players are passionate about the game, which is good, but they train twice or three times a week when the team trains. The best players, the best players like the Mia Hamms that I coach – I've also coached Alex Morgan – these players trained on their own. They kept working with the ball, mastering the ball. Technique is holding us back on both sides, both genders.

The other thing that's holding us back, and it's really no one's fault here in America, is we're not a soccer culture, meaning at this time of year in Europe, every sports talk show – just think about NFL season. How many football talk shows are there; even now, basketball talk shows? In Europe in most of the year, it's all soccer talk shows. There's a sophistication gained from watching high-level sports and from learning from the experts as they talk about it. We have a bit of a sophistication gap in this country. It's gotten better because we have so much high-level soccer on T.V. now. It's probably a little bit better on the boys' side than the girls' side because the girls really don't like to watch that much of it. That's a generality, of course, but most girls don't want to sit and watch a two-hour soccer match.

We have to get more sophisticated, and we've got to be more technical. If you compare our players at, say, a U-17 age group with the U-17 German players, they're good German players. They're playing at a woman's league with 20 year olds, 25 year olds, 30 year olds. Our U-17 players are playing, in most cases, U-17. There is a sophistication gap that we need to catch up on. We cannot do enough technical work, and that goes for coaches that're working with U-teams. The players, when they're on their own, they've got to work technically.

**Gary:**

Yep, great points. You're right on. You're spot on with that. One of the

things that to go to that front, it seems like to me – and I might be wrong here – that youth, or travel, or club teams now seem to be focusing a little bit more on winning than developing. In your opinion, are coaches, youth coaches, should their focus be more on development versus winning, or is there a combination or a balance that we can find?

**Tony:**

Yeah, we're Americans, so we like to win. I think it's one of our great qualities is that we like to win. When we think of competitions, we're really only interested in the people that win Gold Medals. That might be an over-generality. We have to be conscious of what we're doing to our young players. Youth sports is not just about winning and unfortunately in this country, youth soccer is big business. I mean, players pay 2,000 a much more a year to play on elite, premier soccer teams. Those teams, those programs make money because they win, and attract better players, and their fees can go up.

If you look at the rest of the world, the best players playing in youth soccer are in a professional team youth soccer program. The best player for Arsenal in the youth soccer, they're not that concern about the wins and losses. For sure, there's competitions. They want to win, but they're concerned about this player developing so that player can play for Arsenal's team. If they're not quite good enough for Arsenal's first team, they can be sold someplace and make a lot of money. Development in this country is held back a bit because our youth sports and youth soccer specifically are too concerned with winning games rather than developing players.

Really, just expand on that a little bit more, Gary. I'm feeling pretty passionate about this. I've run a youth program for ten years. I don't run it now, but I have. How do you develop players? There's certain games, State Cup games, whatever, you need to win, and you're going to play a little bit differently, but there's a huge percentage of the games that these teams play in the year that winning is not that important. How do you develop versus winning? You play players in a lot of different positions so that when they go to the next level, they're more comfortable. I can tell you right now that Christen Press should be a starter on the national team. Christen Press has always been a center forward. I know first-hand when I coached the U-20 women, I tried to get Christen to play wide, and she wasn't that excited about playing wide. I just went to another player to play a wide midfield, or even a right back, or something.

Too many of our players get their position and never get comfortable playing other positions. I don't think Christen Press has ever gotten comfortable playing as winger or playing midfielder. It's hurt her because in my mind, she's starter ability on a women's national team, but a player like Mallory Pugh's comes in, who's played centrally but also is incredibly comfortable playing wide, and guess what? She's kind of stepped ahead of Christen Press in that wide position. Christen Press right now is competing with Alex Morgan, Carli Lloyd. By playing your best players down the spine of your time, you're going to win more games if you're not developing those players.

They're playing out of the back. You're going to lose some games because you'll lose the ball in defensive parts of the field, and the team will counter-attack and score on you. It might cause you to lose, but are you developing the player if you just tell defenders to keep the ball up-field **[phoneticinaudible][12:03]**? Parents, players, and for sure, coaches need to be inspired to try to win the important games but also make sure you're developing players.

**Gary:**

Boy, well said, Coach. That's tremendous. I totally agree with you on that. If I could switch gears or add to that a little bit, with your experience on the Women's National Team, how did you allow certain styles of leadership to emerge? It looked like you had some pretty unique characters and obviously everybody was a talented player, but there's certainly some leadership that needs to come out, whether they're vocal, whether they show it on the field, behind the scenes. Did you have a way of letting that just naturally or organically emerge, or did you have something in mind to help that develop?

**Tony:**

Yeah, I tried to develop them. Then, I said, whether it's a youth meeting, or my Olympic team, or World Cup team, first thing we talked about when we talked about leadership is you have to know what your role, your leadership role, is with this team. Some are captains, or co-captains, or some might be vocal leaders that kind of are like cheerleaders on the field. Some are organizers on the field. Some lead by role models, by the way they train every day, or the way they play. When I think of that person, I think of Kristine Lilly or Michelle Akers, Judy Foudy, who's one of the captains, also kind of a cheer-leading type personality during games. There's other lesser roles within leadership that are as important, such as being a follower. In the military, they call it followership.

If the veteran players, or the captains, or whatever, the coach, have created a direction in a certain way, everybody has to be a leader and follow that direction. There's a lot of different roles and leadership roles within the team, and they change. For instance last year, Abby Wambach and Christie Rampone were the leaders on our Women's National Team and captains. This year, Carli Lloyd and Becky Sauerbrunn are the captains, so their leadership has changed. Their role in leadership has changed. You would think that a Mallory Pugh at 17 years old, her job is not to try to be the player that everybody listens to, but her job right now, her role in leadership, is support the direction of the coaches, and the captains, and the other veterans on the team, and try and make her team the best that she can help them make.

Everyone has a role in leadership. You got to know your role in leadership. It may change, but it's incredibly important to have positive leadership. I've had players, very talented players, that were leaders, but they were negative leaders. In one situation, and I'm not going to use names, but she's a current member of the women's national team. She was a world champion this summer. She was an Olympic gold medalist in 2012, but when she played for me on the U-

20 Women's National Team, I had to cut her. Loved what she did on the field, loved it, but her negative leadership was affecting the players, or teammates, the coaching staff, and I finally had to tell her that, "I love what you did on the field," but I didn't think we could win with her leadership style on the team. She learned from that. When she was a free agent in the professional league, she came back and played for me, and I always took that as acknowledgment of how I helped her going into the next level.

Gary: I totally agree. That's right, and I think that sometimes coaches at all levels I'm sure but certainly at the younger levels, they tend to not make that hard decision, and that's not necessarily benefiting the player. To be fair, it's important for sure, but you need to be strong sometimes. I applaud you for that. Those are types of things that players hopefully get, and it sounds like that happened in that case. If I look back on your team, Coach, or on your teams really, but you look at Mia Hamm, and she was such an iconic figure. I guess it goes back to that leadership side. Was she more of the show it on the field type of a player? In your opinion, what made Mia Hamm as special as she was?

Tony: It's a great question, Gary. Mia was a one in a generation type player. Mia was not our number one leader. She wasn't a captain but of course because of her stature in the game and in sports – I mean, she was doing commercials with Michael Jordan. She always had an important say with the team, but her work ethic was fantastic. I think Mia lead more by example than by commanding people around.

Having said that, one of her best leadership qualities was that she was the best player in the world during a period of when I coached her. When she was asked by the media what it felt like to be the best player in the world, her answer was outstanding leadership. Her answer was, "I'm not the best player in the world. If I could run all day like Kristine Lilly, or I could win head balls like Michelle Akers, or be a field leader like Judy Foudy, then maybe I'd be the best player in the world, but I can't do all those things. I'm a player on the best team in the world."

To me, that was leadership that I couldn't pay for. Remember, young stars would be coming into the team, but the team was more important than any individual. She was a member of the best team in the world. If we look at sport today out there, there's many star athletes that highlight themselves over the team. That's not what Mia did. Now, Mia had, from a technical standpoint – I would like to see Alex more than do a little bit what Mia did. They're both fantastic goal scorers, both great take-on artists, but Mia would cut the ball, cut it back and forth, and really screw a defender into the ground.

Right now, Alex Morgan just hesitates and tries to blow by them with her speed and because she's so fast, she's able to do that. I'd like to see her pick up some of the things that made Mia Hamm so special because Mia could blow by defenders, but she can also out long-foot them.. Now, she takes a touch inside, and now she's got a free look at

goal before they can recover. I'd like to see Alex Morgan do a lot of that. Mia had tremendous athletic technical, tough mentally. She had all those. She was a total package. Her leadership skill was unique and really, really special.

**Gary:**

You're right about that. Talking about that leadership and to me, one of the things that also seems to be pretty important for playing at a high level or at the highest level is developing that mental toughness that players have. I'm sure there are so many great examples that you could draw upon and maybe one of them that I had, at least for me, anyway, that I thought was incredible was Brandi Chastain taking the PK to win the World Cup and to take it left-footed. It's my understanding, and correct me if I'm wrong, Coach, she wasn't on the original list of five. Did you bump her up to that part? How did that happen? What's the mental toughness that she had to do that? What was your thought process behind that?

**Tony:**

Brandi Chastain's a great example of mental toughness, Gary, for a lot of reasons. Number one is she was on the first World Cup championship team in 1991. We didn't do much in '92 because the budgets back then were very slight. Then she wasn't on the team anymore. Anson Burns **[phonetic][21:41]** was the head coach who didn't select her to come back in. We went to the '95 World Cup, and when I was the head coach she wasn't on the team. She called me after the World Cup in '95, said, "Give me another chance."

She came in, and the rest is history. She became a gold medalist in '96, and you saw what she did in '99. The first piece of mental toughness was she didn't give up on her dream. She kept working at her game. She was a tremendous student of the game. She went to Japan and played professionally over there to keep evolving her game. You got to know mental toughness is dealing with the adversity. No player, whether it's Alex Morgan, Mia Hamm, anyone, steps in at the national team level, youth national team level and every step along the way is just a higher step. There is no one that has a straight line from entry to world champion or Olympic gold medalist. Whether it's injuries, loss of form, whatever it might be, there's always some valley. There's always things a mentally tough player has to overcome.

Brandi was pretty mentally tough. In that year of 1999, her and Shygers **[phonetic][22:57]** were our two go-to people for taking penalty kicks. Brandi was outstanding. In 1999 after three or four years on the team, she'd been scouted. She took her penalty kicks right, and she always shot them across the goalkeeper to the goalkeeper's right. Now teams knew how she was going to take it, and she never deviated from that. We tried to train her to take them right-footed and go to the goalkeeper's left. She wasn't comfortable. She was so good with both feet, and she was my left back. By the way, she was a forward for most of her career. I converted her to left back. She was one of the few Americans who'd have five goals at an international game.

Again, she was willing to play anywhere to get on the field. She was

my left back. She was very good with her left foot. I said, "Okay, Brandi, then practice right-footed but also practice some left-footed." It wasn't like we just threw her in there and said, "Okay, you got to take it left-footed." She had trained the whole year both righty and lefty. She was very comfortable taking lefty. I think her preferred foot was righty. If she took it righty and missed it, I would've never have blamed her if she took a perfect penalty kick lefty.

The other part of your question was the night before the final, the coaching staff, we went over all the scenarios. Okay, what if we go with penalties. If we get the penalties, Michelle Akers probably won't still be in the game, and she wasn't. Who are we going to put in? On my list was Brandi, but one of my other assistant coaches, Lauren Gregg, thought that Brandi had such an up and down year that we probably shouldn't go with her. When she gave me the list after the two overtimes, she had Brandi as number six and Julie Foudy as number five. I said, "I like your list, but just put Julie and Brandi – go left of Brandi. See if she wants to take a penalty. See if she's willing to take it left-footed." Gao Hong had, two months earlier, saved a penalty of hers taking it right-footed, so I just needed Gao Hong of China goalkeeper to see something different. The rest is history, but that's kind of the story.

**Gary:** That's an incredible story, just flat-out incredible. I had the pleasure of talking to Michelle Akers back in the fall. What a delightful person she is. She shared a couple things. We had her talking to my high school team. One of the things that we talked about or that she talked about for us was just that heart of the lion persona that she had and whatever it takes attitude. Boy, she was that, and I guess other things, too. I know Michelle was an amazing player for you as well there.

**Tony:** Michelle Akers was the embodiment of warrior athlete. Dying on the soccer field was okay with Michelle Akers, as long as she got it done. I've never coached or played with anybody that – we've all heard the expression, leave it on the field. Believe me, I've never seen anyone leave it all on the field like Michelle Akers, so I had tremendous respect for Michelle. Her leadership style wasn't cheer-leading out there. She just went into a tackle, wanted a head ball, took physical risk. That was her leadership style. She told us what was needed to win and incredibly strong mental dimension on Michelle Akers. She's a friend of mine, and she is funny, and she still has that same mental toughness.

**Gary:** She is funny. She had us in tears on more than a couple of occasions.

**Tony:** The worst thing you could do around Michelle Akers is back off or not compete. She competes at everything, and right now she's in a horse rescue business. She has a ranch farm in Georgia. She competes every day, and she still does. She's one of my favorite people.

**Gary:** Yep, I agree. We enjoyed her immensely Coach, I thank you so much. With your current program, the Soccer Plus program, you provide

camps and clinics. Is that right or is that accurate?

**Tony:** We do a lot of clinics to promote the camps but yeah, we have camps all summer long. If anyone's interested **[inaudible][28:11]** [www.soccerplus.org](http://www.soccerplus.org), and I've been running camps for over 35 years, goalkeeper schools, field player academy. We also train teams that want to come. We've got over 30 camps nationwide. Some of them are day camps, but most of them are residential camps. I love working with young, motivate student athletes. Most of our kids are junior and senior high school age with **[inaudible][28:45]** aspirations. Yeah, if anybody's interested, go on the web page.

**Gary:** That's great. We will make certain to get that out there to everybody. Coach Diccio, thank you so much for your time. Again, I can't tell you how thankful I am for it. Your thoughts are brilliant We really appreciate that, as well. Anything else, or everything good on your end, Coach? Anything else I missed that you wanted to add?

**Tony:** The only thing I would add is that this is serious, and we're talking about elite players, but for my teams and for my players, fun was still really, really important. Fun has to be in the game. I have an expression, if it's not fun, it's not soccer. If we don't have fun, we stop evolving as players and teams. For all those coaches and parents out there, keep it fun.

**Gary:** Amen to that. Tony Diccio, thank you very much, much appreciated.