

Fever Pitch

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Professor Sue Hertz, who teaches travel-writing for the UNH Cambridge Summer Program, offers her reflections on patriotism and assimilation during the London Olympics.

In the travel-writing course that I teach for the UNH summer program in Cambridge, England, we talk a lot about the difference between tourist and traveller, how the first conjures up images of bellowing Americans demanding ice with their Cokes. How the second is a gentler visitor, a guest fuelled with respect for the host culture, a curiosity to learn more. Each week my travel writers pen essays about their adventures in this land of cream teas and punting, of their efforts to assimilate, not stand out.

So you can imagine my gulp when I heard the plans for a group trip to Newcastle-upon-Tyne to watch the U.S. women's soccer team play New Zealand in the Olympic quarterfinals. Face paint. Red, white, and blue leggings. Stars and stripes t-shirts, sweatshirts, and tank tops. How they would scream USA! all the way from the train to St. James' Park. If this patriotic fervor wasn't worrisome enough, they were headed to a game that would produce the team that would play either Canada or Great Britain in the semi-finals. On a good day, the British roll their eyes at boisterous Americans. On a day with such high stakes, I envisioned our students pummeled by Union Jacks.



This gang of 12 wasn't the first of the UNH Cambridge team to witness Olympic history this summer. Allison Zorawowicz, a UNH English major, scored tickets to men's volleyball. Sarah Bradshaw, a '12 UNH graduate in psychology, watched Japan play Canada in the opening women's soccer match. UNH students Erin Phillips and Luke Robichaud travelled to Glasgow, Scotland to witness the U.S. women's soccer team beat France in a preliminary round. The Glasgow trip was unexpected; they thought they were buying tickets for a London game. "Next time I'll read the fine print," said Luke, an English teaching major.

The difference is that these Olympic attendees left their face paint at home.

Friday, Aug. 3 dawned cloudy and cool, but Rachel Newell was up at 6 a.m., fearful that she might oversleep and miss the train. Rachel is a sophomore at UC Berkeley (over a third of students in the Cambridge program this summer attend colleges other than UNH) and can recite stats, facts, and the injury history of most of the names on the U.S. women's soccer roster. For this game, she wore a Megan

Rapinoe t-shirt. Rapinoe, the midfielder known for her bright blond hair and assists, is one of Rachel's favorites. Her other favorite is forward Alex Morgan, who also attends UC Berkeley.

In addition, Rachel wore red, white, and blue striped socks and painted red, white, and blue squares on her cheeks. This was subtle. Kate Murray, a UNH English major, painted AMERICA on her bare belly. Priscilla Tengdin, a UNH civil engineering major, covered her face in a flag. Rachel Bullen, a junior at Carnegie Mellon, wore tights with

stars so large a UFO could spot them. The troupe marched to the train station, a July Fourth parade.

But a funny thing happened on the way to the Olympics. Instead of being mocked, they were embraced. On the train to Newcastle, locals asked what event they were seeing, where they were from in the states, and who they thought they would win. Ever polite, they simply stated: "USA." When they arrived in Newcastle, whatever self-restraint they had exhibited vanished. They high-fived other Americans. They screamed "America!!" Still, the only scowl they received was from a portly man clutching the stadium bar. Everyone else smiled. The BBC interviewed them – twice. When Kally Riddiger, a UNH junior studying biomedical science, let out pterodactyl screech as Alex Morgan's shot hit the crossbar, a man in the stands took her photo. Stacy Casais, a graduate student at Rutgers University, cheered so aggressively that she attracted the Jumbotron camera. A friend in New Jersey texted her to say that she was on TV.

But it was Rachel Newell who scored so big that the day ranked higher than the one in which she received her college acceptances. Sitting 15-feet from where Alex Morgan was warming up, Rachel leapt to her feet and shouted, "HEY MORGAN! GO BEARS!" knowing that any Berkeley student would know the team mascot.

Alex Morgan looked up, grinned, and gave Rachel the thumbs up.

And then Megan Rapinoe spotted Rachel in the Megan Rapinoe t-shirt and winked.

And then a former member of the team walked by and sat behind Rachel, who just had to lean over and chat.

During the game, she cheered. She swore. When Abby Wambach scored in the 27th minute, she whooped. When Sydney Leroux added an insurance goal in Minute 87, she lost her voice. At the final whistle, the U.S. had won 2-0 and was off to the next round, which would be against Canada.

As Rachel gathered her friends, accepting congratulations, not condemnation, from passersby, she recognized what I had not: that they were students excited about a game, not boorish tourists. The Olympics is the great equalizer, a venue that encourages striped faces and starred legs. In these London 2012 Games everyone but Team GB is a foreigner, and everyone but Team GB is cheering on a foreign nation. Scan any Olympic audience and you'll spot flags and wigs and face paint.

"People," Rachel said dreamily the next morning, "were happy to see us enjoying the moment."

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