

THE KISSING SCANDAL AFTER SPAIN'S WOMEN'S WORLD CUP WIN

The support for a player who endured an unwanted kiss during the trophy presentation shows how attitudes toward women's soccer are changing, but not fast enough.

By Louisa Thomas

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Luis Rubiales has been suspended by FIFA after kissing one of Spain's star players, Jenni Hermoso, after she won the Women's World Cup. Photograph by Noemi Llamas / Getty

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Before Luis Rubiales, the president of Spain's soccer federation, grabbed the head of one of the stars of the Women's World Cup, Jenni

Hermoso, and kissed her lips during the trophy presentation; before he lifted another player, Athenea del Castillo, over his shoulder and paraded her, rear up, around the pitch; before he promised the players a trip to Ibiza and joked about marrying Hermoso; before he declared that he had done nothing offensive and, in fact, was the real victim; before the Spanish federation reportedly threatened to sue Hermoso for denying that the kiss was consensual—before all that, he stood in the stands at Stadium Australia, in Sydney, and pumped his crotch.

The gesture, he later admitted, was rather embarrassing: after all, the Queen of Spain was standing a few feet away, along with her sixteen-year-old daughter. But he could explain! “In a moment of euphoria, I grabbed that part of my body,” Rubiales said, at an extraordinary general-assembly meeting of the RFEF, Spain’s federation. Rubiales looked at Jorge Vilda, the team’s coach, and addressed him directly. “We’ve been through a lot, Jorge, a lot, this past year.” They had been vilified. They had “suffered a lot.” As the final whistle sounded, Rubiales continued, Vilda had turned to the federation president up in the stands to “dedicate” the win to Rubiales. “I replied that, no, no, it was ‘You, you, you.’ And at that moment, I made you this sign, ‘*Ole*, your balls.’” For the lewd gesture, he apologized not to the players but to the “royal household.”

And there it was, straight from the man’s own mouth, the truth behind all of it—behind the unwanted kiss, behind the antics, behind the months of conflict with national-team players, unresolved even as the country hoisted the World Cup trophy. The truth, too, behind the years of neglect, disregard, and disrespect for the women’s game. The women’s win belonged to him and Vilda, Rubiales said. It belonged to their balls.

Only the day before, the team’s former captain Irene Paredes spoke about the stakes of Spain’s appearance in the Women’s World Cup final. “Many of us have grown up thinking that playing football was not our place,” she said. She could have been referring to any number of things. When Paredes

started playing for the national team, it was coached by a man who called players “*chavalitas*,” or little girls, and led the team for decades without success or consequence. The federation at that point devoted less than one per cent of its budget to the women’s program. Club teams were semi-professional, at best. She believed that this game—this World Cup—would change that for girls, for women. “If it serves to let those people know that this game, football, is also ours, that means history will be made, and that would make us very happy,” she said. “A change is taking place.”

Perhaps. Rubiales has been suspended by FIFA while disciplinary proceedings are under way. Eighty-one players eligible for the Spanish women’s team, including the entire world-championship roster, signed a letter declaring that they would not play for their country until the current leadership is out (so far, only one male player with a realistic chance of making the national selection has joined them). The RFEF vice-president resigned, as did eleven members of Vilda’s staff. Politicians have weighed in, condemning Rubiales. Newspapers across the political spectrum have found him at fault. The men’s national-team coach, Luis de la Fuente, who was seen giving Rubiales a standing ovation after his defiant speech, criticized Rubiales for the kiss. Even Vilda, recognizing the inevitable outcome—while refusing to resign himself—joined the pile-on.

And yet, none of Rubiales’s behavior was new. None of it was surprising. We knew it because we’ve been told it before. National-team players had already voiced their concern about Vilda’s patronizing, authoritarian style, reportedly checking their shopping bags and monitoring their whereabouts. The federation had revealed itself in its response to the players’ protest last year: it not only left Vilda in charge but had dismissed the players’ protest and ordered them to apologize. Several of the country’s best players were left off the squad, and it was not entirely clear whether their absences were out of merit, principle, or protest. More recently, it has emerged that in 2016, Tamara Ramos, then a staffer for the Spanish Players’ Association, had accused Rubiales (who was president of the Association at the time) of

commenting on her underwear and joking in front of others that “you’ve come here to put on your kneepads.” (In a statement, the RFEF strongly denied Ramos’s accusations against Rubiales.)

So what has changed? The money, for starters. Clubs realized that a minor investment in women’s soccer—a few percentage points of their men’s teams’ balance sheets—could have a strong return, that they could convert crowds of six thousand into ninety thousand. The players pushed their federation into providing better conditions by the players; not even a man like Rubiales could ignore the overwhelming wealth of talent that the domestic clubs now offered. And when young girls saw the brilliant, pleasing style with which players like Paredes, Alexia Putellas—a two-time winner of the women’s Ballon d’Or for world’s best player—and Hermoso competed, and the training and support increasingly offered by domestic academies, they saw a path, and so made one.

Attitudes are changing. You could see it in the course of the week—how standing ovations turned into critical statements, how Hermoso herself at first uncomfortably laughed the kiss off, before acknowledging that it was demeaning and disrespectful, at the very moment the women should have been celebrated for their triumph.

Their triumph. Rubiales is as good as gone, and Vilda probably is, too. But the danger is that they become mere scapegoats, that they let people congratulate themselves for fixing the problem, forget their own parts, and move on. After all, it was only two weeks ago that Gianni Infantino, the FIFA president, claimed credit for a successful World Cup and told women to “pick the right battles” in the fight for equality. It would have been funny if it were not so dire—if so many participants in the World Cup were not trying to sound the alarm about sexual abuse, about wage theft and inequality, and other serious violations. Spain was hardly the only country to battle its own federation. The circumstances faced by other nations were arguably even more dismal. The Nigerian team, which made the Round of 16, reportedly

considered boycotting its opening game in protest over outstanding payments the players say they are owed. Jamaica made it out of the group stage despite having to launch a GoFundMe campaign. Canada won the Tokyo Olympics gold medal despite years of financial neglect and a recent sexual-abuse scandal involving the now-convicted national U-20 team coach. Paredes is right; change is coming. But it won't arrive until respect and rights are seen as more than the victor's rewards. ♦

An earlier version of this article misstated Irene Paredes's role on the team.