

Remember the Women By Annie Meyers

Brandi Chastain ripped off her jersey and power-slid onto her knees. Eyes closed, face turned to the sky, screaming and smiling, both fists raised, the right clenching her white jersey. The United States defeated China, 5-4. After two scoreless hours and a penalty shootout, the women's soccer team claimed the 1999 FIFA World Championship.

The game marked a turning point, legitimizing a women's sporting event where skill trumps looks and outfits are designed for functionality, not sexuality. Then-president Bill Clinton and 90,184 other fans sat in the stands at the Rose Bowl in sunny Los Angeles. Millions more watched at home. Including one fan in San Francisco.

Robin Lee, 55 started as a collector of San Francisco 49ers memorabilia, especially items from NFL Hall-of-Fame quarterback Joe Montana. She also had an interest in memorabilia from female athletes, having grown up playing sports such as softball and basketball. Lee started tagging along with friends to collector shows in San Francisco and Santa Clara in the mid '90s.

"I started realizing...there's nothing here about the women. There was nothing available from my heroes, people that I looked up to and wanted to collect," Lee said. "There'd be like 200 dealer tables and I might find maybe 10 items. I mean, not even 10 vendors, just maybe 10 items."

She searched for memorabilia from athletes such as Chrissie Evert, Lisa Leslie and Mia Hamm, but was increasingly disappointed by their absence. So she got an idea.

"I thought, well here's a niche, here's a place where I can actually fit in and make a mark, fill in a void there," Lee said.

She thought her timing could not have been better. The United States women's soccer team's victory in the 1999 FIFA World Cup made women's soccer take off like a rocket. Mia Hamm solidified her status as the top female athlete, and Brandi Chastain made little girls across the country want to lace up their cleats, strap on some shin guards and join American Youth Soccer Organization leagues.

Across the country in Scarsdale, New York, 56-year-old Brandon Steiner also saw this opportunity. The CEO of a successful sports marketing and memorabilia business called Steiner Sports decided to carry women's memorabilia after watching Mia Hamm play in 1999. He also commissioned her for a marketing deal with Dannon Yogurt that offered special prizes like sport collectables.

"My first woman spokesman that we had ever done was Mia Hamm; we did phenomenal [aka Dannon and Steiner sold a lot of yogurt and memorabilia, respectively]," Steiner said.

In the nearly 30 years since Title IX passed, there had not been a singular women's sporting event to bring so much attention. Individual athletes such as Billie Jean King and Chris

Evert, had their moments, but never reached superstar status. The world cup was the visibility needed to inspire a generation of young girls like Steiner's then 5-year-old daughter, Nicole.

Kat Usavage was 6 years old and had just started playing AYSO soccer in her hometown of Arroyo Grande, California, when the FIFA championship took place three hours away. She does not remember watching the game, but the players left a lasting impact.

"Some of my heroes, I think all girls my age would say Mia Hamm because she was just a beast at scoring goals," Usavage said. "Brandi Chastain was another athlete I looked up to because she was the one that solidified the win in that PK shootout for the 1999 World Cup. To have such poise under pressure, and kick with your off foot, was something I looked up to."

Usavage was the kind of customer Lee hoped her newly formed memorabilia business, Girl Jocks, would serve. But despite Steiner's success in selling Hamm's image, Lee struggled to attract families like Usavage's, or customers at all.

"When I started...people didn't even know that there was stuff for women out there that was available," Lee said.

Collector shows also took a hit, with only 25,000 attending the 1999 National Sports Collectors Convention in Atlanta, the lowest numbers since the '80s.

In the early 2000s Mia Hamm helped to instate a professional women's soccer league in the US. She also played for a few more years, including in the US's 2004 Olympic gold medal winning match against Brazil in Athens. As Hamm neared retirement, the demand for her memorabilia grew along with the business.

Lee used her vacation time to go to shows, looking for items wherever she could, including eBay and certified vendors. She made friends in the tight-knit collecting community of less than 200 regulars selling merchandise. At shows she earned their respect for being the sole woman running her own booth and managing the labor and long hours without help.

"I was humping my boxes and setting up everything and doing it all myself and they really kind of admired that," Lee said. "[And] because I was the only woman doing my own booth and the girl stuff, I was no threat or competition to any of the other guys."

Other collectors began sending customers Lee's way, and even helped her get more inventory, offering merchandise from signings they arranged or funded. In 2004 Hamm retired, five years after Lee began her business. That same year Jennie Finch and US women's softball captured the country's attention. Lee was thrilled.

"I love softball. Softball is my all time favorite, No. 1 sport," Lee said.

Finch and team USA's success in the 2004 Olympics, when the US defeated Australia 5-1 for the gold, issued in a new era for women's sports memorabilia dealers. Jennie Finch was a superstar and her merchandise was in demand. Over the next few years leading up to the 2008

Olympic softball title and her retirement, Finch joined the ranks of Hamm in terms of popularity. Since then the United States women's soccer team has taken over after earning gold medals in the last several Olympics, and capturing the nation's attention when they took the FIFA title last summer.

The women's sports memorabilia market has grown remarkably since 1999, but it is still not expressly lucrative. Lee sells between 10 and 50 of the 300 items she brings to a show, depending on the day. Her website sales are even less predictable. Though her customers span a wide range of sports fans, both male and female, Lee has never earned enough to sustain herself without a full-time job. Steiner carries few women's memorabilia items, and their sales account for a fraction of his earned millions each year.

Despite considering herself a women's soccer super fan, it took Usavage eight years to acquire women's soccer memorabilia. Although now that she has a signed soccer ball, jersey and book she said she would add to her collection if she had a larger apartment.

"The Brandi Chastain items take me back to being a seven-year-old kid kicking a ball around in the fields behind my house, hoping I would be the next big thing," Usavage said.

This is what the memorabilia market thrives on, items that represent the person the customer used to be, that embody a special time in that individual's life. The same goes for the vendors.

A few of the most prized items in Lee's collection are "a baseball bat signed by 34 of the players and maybe one or two of the actors who played them in the movie *A League of Their Own*," and signed jerseys from Brandi Chastain, Mia Hamm and Jennie Finch.

But Lee and Steiner are not as worried about enticing existing fans into buying women's sports memorabilia. The greater issue is that women's sports lack much of the visibility needed to grow a new fan base, let alone sustain a pool of paying customers. The largest crowds pay attention to the event games, such as last year's women's World Cup grudge-match between the US and Japan. That match scored the largest audience in US soccer history, with just 25.4 million viewers compared to the 39.1 million viewers of the least-watched Super Bowl II in 1968. That was four years before the passage of Title IX. The largest attendance for a women's soccer game was the 1999 World Cup Final, a crowd that did not exceed the 100,000 that average college football games draw.

Women's sports are relatively new to the spotlight. Seventeen years have passed since the FIFA win in '99. The trouble with memorabilia is that something is only worth remembering if people notice when it happens. Slowly, widespread fans are paying attention to what women do in sports. Eventually these performances will become events deemed worthy of memorabilia, reminders of by-gone eras. But the thing about memories is that they get sweeter over time.

"The women are very talented and worth watching," Steiner said. "We need women [and men] to support and to get more into the women's sports like the way they are to the men's sports. It just takes a little time but it's happening, the progress is there."