WAGS Tournament – 50 Years

Adele Dolansky

It is hard to believe that 50 years have passed since the very first WAGS Tournament. What started as a simple shared dream between Rael Vodicka, Mavis Derflinger and I has blossomed into a game-changing organization that continues to promote exceptional talent and provide bright futures for girls in 2025.

There are so many memories to share. Since the beginning, I have kept detailed records of almost every WAGS Tournament I was involved with. I have a lot of things written down, from team names to tournament staff. I've taken great care to record exact dates, so that not a single detail is out of place. You should see how many files I have on my computer dedicated to WAGS history…

And so, I'd like to reflect on the last 50 years by sharing some memories of the tournament's early years—not only to reminisce about its growing pains, but to express how far WAGS has come.

The 1st annual WAGS Tournament began on October 10th, 1975, at the Charter House hotel in the city of Alexandria, Virginia. A total of 25 teams entered the tournament, including teams journeying from Eastern Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Canada.

You would imagine that visiting teams would've been provided with rooms at our headquarters hotel, but back then, WAGS didn't have the booking power to block hotel rooms. Instead, we had to get creative.

For the first couple years of the tournament, we created an Out-Of-Town system of lodging for our players, in which the visiting teams would be housed by local teams. Usually, home team families would take in players of the visiting team, two players per family. Every visiting player would bring a gift, as a "thank you" for their host family.

Although it seems a bit out-of-the-ordinary for modern times, billeting players in this way created lasting friendships, and brought communities together. In the beginning stages of WAGS, word-of-mouth advertisement was one of the strongest ways to promote the tournament. By knitting families together, WAGS was able to extend its reach and unite hundreds of people through the game of soccer.

During the 3rd annual WAGS Tournament, I remember that we had a "Teen Dance" for the 1963 (and older) girls. On a Saturday evening, a live band would play the hits for the players, while the parents and coaches went to a disco, complete with a DJ.

Not only were these events popular, but they became ads for the tournament itself. You'd be hard pressed to find a teen in 1977 not interested in dancing! Mavis and I were chaperones at the event, which we repeated year after year. It was a lot of fun for us, too.

Lastly, I remember the 4th annual WAGS Tournament—an unforgettable year, considering we had our first European entry from Rotterdam, Holland. With a total of 120 teams competing, it was a great weekend of soccer. The Rotterdam team was a big draw, and the players were full of surprises.

The Rotterdam girls flew into D.C. a couple of days before the tournament so that they had time to sightsee. They went shopping and took time to enjoy their stay in the United States. I remember that a must-buy item for the girls was denim jeans, of all things.

But when the weekend came around, the girls were focused on victory. They went on to become champions of the 1960's Division. They were not bashful players, and would change into their game jerseys on the field—much to the shock of the audience! Their skill and these antics brought excitement and attention to the WAGS Tournament.

These are only a few memories of mine, but there are so many more to be made.

From its creation, WAGS stood for equal opportunity in the game of soccer. Through the hard work and dedication of passionate people, the tournament thrived. With these tournament memories I share, it is important to remember all the effort put into making the tournament *happen* at all.

I remember all the friends I worked alongside, all of the problems we faced, all of the solutions we came up with. I remember board members, volunteers, club delegates; people from all walks of life united under the dream that girls' soccer could be something so much more. And by working together, through blood, sweat and tears, that dream was made reality.

Together, we all changed the landscape of the girl's game. Before WAGS, girls were playing on unacceptable fields—using hand-me-down equipment leftover from the boy's teams. Becoming a professional soccer player, or even just a college soccer player, wasn't considered a viable future for girls. But we demanded to be taken seriously. We legitimized the game, not only through the WAGS tournament, but behind the scenes—in the weeds of youth soccer politics.

We lobbied our state sanction to create a college exhibition division, so that our players' dreams didn't have to end in high school. We created an environment where college coaches could scout multiple prospects in a single location, which was quite a win! Not only could college coaches scout WAGS teams, but out of town teams as well.

A college social—where club coaches and college coaches would mingle together and discuss the day's matches and players in a relaxed environment. This was crucial in the development of the women's game and opened more and more doors for our girls.

When woman's soccer was designated an "exhibition sport" for the 1996 Olympics, we campaigned relentlessly for change. For this game we loved so much, together—and with congressional support—we swayed the US Olympic Committee, and secured women's soccer's place as a medal sport. Through petitions, word of mouth, and through utilizing the reach of the WAGS tournament, we revolutionized girls' soccer, and we continue to revolutionize with each passing day.

I could not be prouder of how WAGS has grown. I am honored to have been a part of its creation. The spirit of girls' soccer truly lives on in the youth of today.

Let's look forward to another 50 great years!