



(Mehta, K., 2023)
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'Wow! We've done it!' New Zealand give World Cup lift-off

Kalika Mehta Auckland

07/20/2023

Co-hosts New Zealand got the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup underway in style with a victory over favorites Norway in the opening game. The day began tragically in Auckland, but football is uniting the country.



Lift-off: Hannah Wilkinson scored the winner for co-hosts New Zealand in the World Cup opener

Image: Phil Walter/Getty Images

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WORLD CUP 2023

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For the first time ever, a New Zealand national team – men's or women's – had won a game at a **World Cup**. And what a time to do it.

At the sixteenth time of asking, in their sixth finals appearance, playing on home soil in front of 42,137 jubilant supporters at Eden Park, the "Football Ferns" edged out favorites **Norway** courtesy of Hannah Wilkinson's 48th-minute strike.

For substitute Claudia Bunge, who had been warming-up on the sideline, the chaos of getting caught up in Wilkinson's celebrations was a moment that will live long in her memory.

"One minute I was trying to do some leg swings and then we scored and everyone erupted and it was actually just crazy," she breathlessly told DW.

"Wilkie [Wilkinson] came and ran straight to us and it was amazing. I can't describe it. Playing at a sold-out Eden Park and the biggest football game that's ever been played in **Aotearoa [the indigenous Maori name for New Zealand]**, it's just awesome to be part of history."

Kalika Mehta
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Absolutely deafening at Eden Park.

New Zealand win their first ever [#FIFAWWC](#) match against heavyweights Norway.

Captain Ali Riley in floods. What a night for this team and for women's football in a country with no professional women's football teams.

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New Zealand: inspiring the next generation

If New Zealand's stated aim at this World Cup is to "inspire a new generation of young girls" to play the game, then the blistering counterattack they launched ahead of Wilkinson's goal was the perfect way to do it – the ball going from goalkeeper Victoria Esson to the back of the Norwegian net in just 11 seconds.

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Nevertheless, New Zealand held on for a victory which could well galvanize an unashamedly rugby-obsessed nation behind their team playing with the round ball.

"We're thinking of all the past Ferns who have gone before us. This win tonight is for all of them for the path they laid for us," said Percival.

"We saw the little kids tonight standing there after the match, smiles on their faces, cheering, high-fiving, just so happy.

"For us to be able to give them that joy in the opening game, it puts us on the front foot going into the next two games, to keep inspiring them so that they will hopefully want to follow in our footsteps one day."



All together now: co-hosts New Zealand have lift-off at their World Cup

Image: Kim Price/ZUMA Wire/IMAGO

'Nerves? That shows we care'

With only one professional women's football team in the country – who compete in the **Australian A-League** – there were questions over whether this World Cup would garner the recognition or attention it deserved in New Zealand.

Only a few billboards or posters have been dotted around highlighting women's football's biggest tournament in the city, while world governing body FIFA has given away 20,000 free tickets for four of the matches with the lowest ticket sales.

But, having been told ahead of the World Cup opener that the crowd would exceed the previous record of just over 12,000 for a women's international – set in April when New Zealand took on the United States – Bunge admitted the nerves were ever-present.

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Not that there was much evidence of nerves on the pitch as New Zealand came out of the blocks in their home tournament full of confidence, belief and skill, immediately putting Norway under pressure and dominating the first half, winning almost 80% of their attempted tackles.

Aside from a Frida Maanum shot which went over the bar and a late Tuva Hansen effort which came back off it, the Norwegians – including Olympique Lyon star Ada Hegerberg and Barcelona's Caroline Hansen – struggled to get a handle on the match.



Casting a shadow: the World Cup opening day began in tragic fashion in Auckland

Image: David Rowland/REUTERS

Auckland shooting mars build-up

Their preparations had perhaps been disturbed by the **[fatal shooting earlier in the day](#)** which had seen two people killed by a lone gunman on a construction site just 600 meters away from the Norwegian team's hotel.

The intended opening of a Fan Festival in downtown Auckland was canceled, and a minute's silence was held ahead of the match. Both sets of players insisted that the incident didn't disrupt them, but Percival admitted that it made victory feel all the more important.

"It was obviously a tough morning for us all and our thoughts are with the victims," she said.

"It's not the best news to wake up to on the opening day of the World Cup but we took time as a team to have a bit of a moment to sit with it all.

"But it didn't put us off our focus of being ready for this game. I guess it made it that extra more special to be able to get the win today."

'It means so much'

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"I don't know if we'll be getting much sleep tonight. It means so much."

Edited by Matt Ford



Kalika Mehta Sports reporter
[Journos K](#)

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Q "Our whole mindset for this tournament is we want to inspire the next untapped generation and I think we've done that tonight," said co-captain Percival, who had spoken beforehand about **never believing or dreaming of playing at a home World Cup.**

Making her 162nd appearance for the Ferns, she could have ensured a slightly less nervy nine minutes of injury time had she managed to convert a 90th-minute penalty – but her shot came back off the bar.

Nevertheless, New Zealand held on for a victory which could well galvanize an unashamedly rugby-obsessed nation behind their team playing with the round ball.

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