

## An Equality Too Far? Historical and Contemporary Perspectives of Gender Inequality in British and International Football

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**Abstract:** The purpose of the article is to examine the significance of female play in Association Football in Britain. The European context indicates shifting social values from the beginnings of the ‘women’s game’ in the 1890s to the present day.

The argument begins with the premise that sporting practices are historically produced, socially constructed and culturally defined. Britain pioneered the first phase of football’s widespread popularity with women during, and shortly after, the First World War. The English Football Association (FA) found this threat to the male professional game sufficiently serious to ‘ban’ women’s football in 1921. The revival of women’s football in the 1960s as primarily a participatory activity (rather than as a spectator-supported sport) is still answering an agenda whereby gender difference is naturalised and fixed.

However, there is an independent practice of English women’s football which, in its most recent form, has become a centrally regulated, but essentially devolved and voluntaristic sporting activity. Consequently, the question of whether the FA can be seen as the most appropriate patron of the supposed national sport is set against the self-governing tradition of the women’s game. Legal and educational narratives of equality compare unfavourably with, for

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The title comes from the BBC Radio 4 Women’s Hour interview of 16 June 2005 entitled “Should the sexes play together at the highest level?” in which host Jenni Murray asked me whether this is a step too far for sexual equality? The idea of having too much equality is an interesting one!

example, Scandinavia and the United States where there is some expectation of equity of result, rather than of opportunity.

## Introduction

It has been argued that no organized sport has assumed a greater hold on the time and emotions of the working class throughout Europe than football.<sup>1</sup> It is unclear whether that comment was meant to include women players and their supporters, however events such as the forthcoming Women's World Cup in China in 2007 bring to mind Allen Guttman's phrase about sport and politics: "It should also be a platitude, although it is not, that modern sports have also become a venue for femininity, a site where women are able to display their physical prowess."<sup>2</sup> It remains uncommon but not unknown for sport to site female excellence. Consequently to borrow this tension between the feminine and physical prowess specifically for football, writing in the country which calls itself the home of the game, in the twenty first century, is not without reward. The cliché of a vital, skilled, accomplished football hero, who also happens to be a woman, is unfortunately much less in evidence than other more derogatory stereotypes referring to sport generally and football particularly. The academic treatment of women's football however is new, unsure, uncertain, with a need for theoretical underpinnings and the thematic review is intended to forward that cause. The three elements of this historiography are: the precarious position of women's football from the nineteenth century to the present; problems of definition related to the term 'women's football'; the current situation relating to professionalism and EU Sports Law – the issue of integration of women's participation in administrative and bureaucratic terms. The focus here is on women's participation as players because this is the most contested and contentious issue in both historical and contemporary terms. Aspects of professionalism and integration are evidently part of this discourse but also sufficiently weighty to require more in-depth treatment elsewhere.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Korr. "West Ham United Football Club and the Beginnings of Professional Football in East London 1895-1914", *Journal Of Contemporary History* 13 (London and Beverly Hills: SAGE, 1978) 211-32.

<sup>2</sup> Allen Guttman. "Sport, Politics and the Engaged Historian" *Journal of Contemporary History* 38.3 (2003): 370. Though I would like to add as a caveat a point made by Jennifer Hargreaves in *Sporting Females: Critical Issues in the History and Sociology of Women's Sport* (London: Routledge, 1994); and in *Heroines of Sport: The Politics of Difference and Identity* (London: Routledge, 2000). See also M. Ann Hall, *Feminism and Sporting Bodies: Essays on Theory and Practice* (Champaign, Illinois: Human Kinetics, 1996). Both argue, as have many others subsequently, that we should be talking about multiplicity rather than a feminine, as in female-appropriate, image for women in sport and for women's sports.

## Women's Football in Britain: Beginnings

The first use of the idea of women's football as a fastest growing sport came from the English Women's Football Association (WFA) in 1992. In some senses it marked a watershed; the last of twenty-three years of WFA control before the English Football Association (FA) took control of women's football in 1993. The WFA had been formed on behalf of women in 1969 and was mainly staffed by volunteers like Flo Bilton, Linda Whitehead, Pat Gregory and Sue Lopez. But in more significant ways it was a hand-over rather than a take-over. Since its formation, the association had been led by those who wanted the FA to acknowledge, accept and administer women's football. While women's participation has taken place in several countries for over a hundred years, there has been a hostility to female participation on behalf of the sporting bureaucracies that has been the most defining feature for the women's game. This includes a fifty year 'ban' imposed by the English Football Association from 1921 to 1972 and several obviously discriminatory legal cases since this was lifted. This idea of banning women spread to other countries and the idea of football as an inappropriate sport for women became part of the British exportation of the game. For example the Deutscher Fussball-Bund (DFB) reissued such a ban in 1955 and rescinded it in 1970. Like football itself, the concept of issuing prohibitions may not, however, have been a British idea to begin with: In the Netherlands in 1896 a Sparta Club from Rotterdam had tried to play against an English XI but the Koninklijke Nederlandse Voetbalbond (KNVB) issued a ban which it repeated in 1924, 1955 and 1960. One of the challenges of the historiography was to understand the forces in seeking patronage from conservative sporting federations.

What do we know of the early years of women's football? Is it possible to pick a moment as the first instance of the sport? Since sport is typically defined as an institutionalized, highly structured, rule-bound physical contest, essentially a creation of the nineteenth century, women's early participation in football is difficult to pinpoint. In the nineteenth century upper class Japan women played a courtly form of foot juggling and Native American women played folk football; possibly linked to fertility rites or feast days. Nevertheless, the early British examples are perhaps the most significant in the tradition of women's football as sport because there appear to have been at least 150 'Ladies' clubs playing regularly by 1922. In the final decades of the nineteenth century women were agitating for improved economic, social, educational and political conditions in an era of popular entertainment and there were many new 'healthful' forms of recreation covered in the pages of the *Athletic News*, from boat polo for ladies to a feminized form of football on roller-skates.

Though some female pedagogues thought football to be too rough for girls, there is evidence of a variety of school or college competitions at the turn of the century. In 1884 there was a football club at the Brighton High School and football was played in the early days of Nottingham High School. Middle class girls may have had some access to sportsgrounds. However, for working class girls and boys, finding space to play was a constraining factor as was poverty and ill health. We know little of girls street football in single-sex groupings or mixed with boys at this time. Like hockey and cricket, football was perceived by some woman educators to lead to possible injury and the medical theories of the day often held that bruises to the chest or torso could become cancerous. Inverness, Scotland, appears to have hosted the first recorded women's football match outside an educational setting in 1888. This can be interpreted as distinct from folk football, like the late eighteenth century women's games, or mixed holiday activities such as Shrove Tuesday, though it did pit the married versus the single women. The two teams had colours, fixed goals, a fairly stable and even number of members and the game had a limited time span. The first match within Scottish FA guidelines was held at Shawfields Ground, Glasgow in 1892.

The British Ladies Football Club was founded in 1894 and Nettie Honeyball, the secretary of the association, organized the English North versus South game at Crouch End, London in 1895 with a crowd of 10,000 making it more than just a novelty. It was followed by games in the Midlands, the North and in Scotland; the most significant of which was the Newcastle fixture with a crowd approaching 8,000. Lady Florence Dixie, the President of the British Ladies' Football Club, youngest daughter of the Marquess of Queensbury and a keen advocate of women's rights, sponsored the tour with the declared aim: "I am in hopes that the British Ladies Football Club will be able to furnish teams to travel about the country, and endeavor to popularize the sport by playing some matches in different localities."<sup>3</sup> Dixie's touring team played games at Cappelow (Greenock Morton FC), Love Street (St Mirren FC) and Reaburn Place in Edinburgh, amongst others.<sup>4</sup> Though the trip attracted great publicity, the coverage was not confined to the sporting contest and crowd violence sometimes marred the match. While professional in attitude to making money, the team struggled to find opposition and the question of several women exercising in public in costumes considered relatively revealing, contributed to the sala-

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<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to staff at the Scottish Football Association Museum for the newspaper articles which carry this quotation including *The Scottish Referee*, *The Scottish Sport*, *The Scottish Umpire* from 1895.

<sup>4</sup> Commentaries in *The Scottish Referee*, *The Scottish Sport*, *The Scottish Umpire* from 1895; David Williamson, *The Belles of the Ball* (Devon: R and D Associates, 1991) has coverage and many photos of this early era, including of Nettie Honeyball in kit and boots. *Belles of the Ball* was serialised in the WFA Newsletter amongst other publications and so was a key text in the late 1980s in circulating ideas of a tradition of women players to the wider women's football community.

cious nature of some reportage. A tradition began of attempting to link football with lady-like behaviour that persists today: some contemporary British teams call themselves Ladies Football clubs. The question of respectability has never really gone away.

Another way that women's football acquired a dubious status for the bourgeois girl was a link with the rights question. Though there had been some change in public opinion about the place of games for girls in public schools, women who participated in individual and group sports were likely to have their motivation discussed and criticized especially if it involved Rational dress. Whether early women players were politically motivated, fashion conscious, tentative sports enthusiasts, or a little of each, the authorities viewed their involvement as a nuisance. The ambiguous status of women's football was evident in the ban by the English FA from men playing against 'lady teams' in 1902 and a more blanket ban on women's teams playing at the grounds of clubs affiliated to the FA and the Football League from 5 December 1921 to 29 November 1971. Football was officially viewed by the FA as an 'unsuitable' game for females.

This was preceeded by a significant increase in spectator-supported women's games. In this time, i.e. during and shortly after the First World War, Britain pioneered the first phase of women's football. The most eminent team, 'Dick, Kerr Ladies', travelled to Europe, Canada and the United States to play and live audiences of tens of thousands.<sup>5</sup> British women's football led the world at this time. David Williamson's analysis of the broader trends is evident from the following excerpt:

By early 1920 it was no idle kick about on a ploughed field with a few curious onlookers on the touchlines; it was Stamford Bridge, White Hart Lane and Goodison Park...Clubs were springing up from a variety of backgrounds. One such was Lyons Ladies, made up from girls working in the various Lyons cafes around London.<sup>6</sup>

This does appear to have been the case, though the crowds were not always so large as the often referred to peak of 55,000 spectators at Goodison Park Boxing in 1921 (with several thousand outside). The considerable spectator support and media interest from that period is the more astonishing as it is noticeably absent in the present. In the revival of women's football since the 1960s, large crowds and media interest are not a big part of the women's game but participation rates are considerably higher. In addition, at elite level, since the middle of the 1980s, the English national team has gradually become less successful

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<sup>5</sup> Alethea Melling, "Cultural Differentiation, Shared Aspiration: The Entente Cordiale of International Ladies' Football 1920-45", *The European Sports History Review* 1 (1998) indicates the long history of friendship and competition between the English "Dick, Kerr" team and French players from various teams; Jean Williams, *A Game for Rough Girls? A History of Women's Football in England* (London: Routledge, 2003) also has a tour by a Stoke club to play against the French Femina team in Barcelona in 1923.

<sup>6</sup> Williamson 86.

and other countries have progressively overtaken them in international influence.<sup>7</sup>

The diagnosis of 'decline' is evident, although women's football did not end with the FA ban in 1921. Research has identified at most probably 150 teams playing regular matches, including internationals in the years 1921 – 1960 with significant a drop during World War Two to approximately 26.<sup>8</sup> However many players active during this time, even those who played for thirty years, felt that it was a lost sport, not in terms of being played, but lost to history.

From the images, postcards and programmes held in private hands of female players it would appear that the community of women's football was not a sexually segregated one. A variety of male supporters, from professional players like Arthur Bridgett, Sir Tom Finney, Bert Trautman, and Geoff Hurst to managers, coaches and sponsors have played active parts in facilitating female football throughout its history. In contrast, in a wide variety of official and other histories the argument follows the line that the 1921 ban and subsequent lack of sporting and employment opportunity for women in football has been of little importance.

However the situation was not that simple. An increase of female participation in the 1960s occurred against a backdrop of flagging fixtures amongst those teams that still existed from the earlier heyday. "Dick, Kerr Ladies", for example, ceased to play in 1965. Manchester Corinthians began in 1949 and ended in the early 1970s.<sup>9</sup> Sheila Stocks and many of the older Doncaster Belles began to play in 1969 after selling Golden Goals tickets at Doncaster Rovers because the job gave them free entry to watch the club they had supported all their lives. Knowing that they could not join a men's team, they clubbed together and initially played at five and six a side until sufficient numbers joined to form a full team.<sup>10</sup> This suggests that the history of women's football is not discontinuous nor was 1966 the catalyst it has been held to be not least because football for women became more popular as a participation sport at around this time in other countries.

This view also assumes that teams were formed for sports-specific purposes. Yet, from the examples above, it is possible to see a pattern of work-based teams, representative teams, clubs formed by football enthusiasts from a local

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<sup>7</sup> However, Sue Lopez, *Women on the Ball* (London: Scarlet, 1997) indicates that England won the Mundialito, the unofficial women's World Cup, twice in 1985 and 1988. Also, Williams argues, for example, the participation by Chiltern Valley in another unofficial Women's World Cup in Mexico in 1971 led to the expulsion of the whole East Midlands Ladies Alliance (of which Chiltern Valley were the champions) from the WFA so a variety of 'England' representative teams participated in these and other international tournaments which pre dated official FIFA Women's World Cup.

<sup>8</sup> Williamson 75 has 150 teams in 1921.

<sup>9</sup> Manchester Corinthians Programme Festival of Britain Football Match at Craven Park, Barrow 1951 Programme notes.

<sup>10</sup> SE founder Doncaster Belles player and now coach, Bolton 12 May 1999.

area and, often, a combination of the three. At the instigation of the European Union of Football Associations (UEFA), the FA provisionally recognised the Women's Football Association in 1972 and then took control twenty one years later, since which time their previous lack of enthusiasm has been hidden by slogans of a dynamic bureaucracy responding to a fast growing female sport.

## International Women's Football: More Recent Developments

Since then, there is a seemingly contagious academic hunch that women's football is to become the Next Big Thing. It's not just in the New Labour-style public releases of the English Football Association that this is encouraged. The world governing body, Fédération International de Football Association (FIFA), has used phrases such as "The Future is Feminine", "Catch The Wave", and the rather more tired "This is My Game Watch Me Play". These have joined the FA's "Fastest Growing Participation Sport for Women" and the "Return of the Beautiful Game" as slogans attempting to depict female players as approved of, part of modernity and increasingly, well, *normal*. It is a fine balancing act as the bureaucracies attempt to simultaneously sell the message of an established female-appropriate sport with great potential for expansion in a number of ways but which will proliferate in a manner that poses no threat whatsoever to the highly commercialised world of male professional football. It is the same sport, we are to understand but played, crucially, differently. The subject then is, academically speaking, fresh, new and exciting while women's participation has taken place in several countries for over a hundred years.

Unfortunately, many of the problems besetting the women's game have a familiarity, even if expressed in new contexts. This feature came to my mind ironically while I was attending the 2003 Women's World Cup (WWC), the second in the United States in four years. Following the SARS outbreak, the People's Republic of China organising committee's extensive preparation to host the tournament had to be shelved. The decision made by FIFA to relocate the competition was welcomed by the women's football community, who had feared that the tournament as a whole would be cancelled. In spite of the extremely tight deadlines, the pressure on arenas and media air time that the October re-scheduling entailed, the US organising committee hosted a competitive event.

However, the scale of the enterprise, from staging to support to media interest, was in marked contrast with the 1999 Women's World Cup. This had also been held in Los Angeles and was used to launch the FIFA Los Angeles Declaration of Women's Football which included the commitment "to assess the results of their action in favour of women's football every four years, the next

time being on the occasion of the 4th FIFA Women's World Cup in 2003".<sup>11</sup> As women's football returned to the city for that event, the announcement of the suspension of trading of Women's United Soccer Association (WUSA), the professional independent female league in North America, was a reminder that the development of women's football across the world and in specific countries has historically been difficult and contentious.

The success of spectacle in Women's World Cup 1999 had been followed by the launch of WUSA, by a FIFA-sponsored Under-19 World Championship for Women (U-19), by a European Cup club competition for women and numerous other promising developments.<sup>12</sup> There was, and is, sufficient cause for optimism regarding the future development of amateur and international aspects of women's football to celebrate athleticism, determination and conviction. For example, the 2004 FIFA U-19 Women's World Championships in Thailand was broadcast on television in 130 nations (compared with 20 nations for the inaugural 2002 competition). Nevertheless, it felt bleak to see some of the former WUSA coaches and players, many of them being foreigners, agonise over their US visa status as a result of loss of employment. The prospect of key individuals having to leave the lives they had built around their exceptional talent to face an uncertain future hung in the air at WWC 2003, however good the sport.<sup>13</sup>

The different atmosphere of the two US tournaments and the standing of the most prestigious women's world events reflects a broader ambivalence about the game as appropriate for females and particularly as a profession.<sup>14</sup> Unusually, both the 2007 FIFA Women's World Cup and the 2008 Olympic Games are to be hosted by China which effectively places the two women's premier world tournaments in the same country in successive years. Other recent changes to the global profile of women's football include a degree of rationali-

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<sup>11</sup> FIFA, *FIFA Los Angeles Declaration of Women's Football*, 2nd Symposium on Women's Football, Los Angeles, 8 July 1999, 1.

<sup>12</sup> When Russia hosts the next youth tournament in 2006, it will be known as the FIFA U-20 Women's World Championship. The next proposal is the creation of a FIFA U-17 Women's World Championship, which, according to FIFA's Executive Committee, will have its inaugural edition in 2008.

<sup>13</sup> See for example K. Dawson. *Grass Ceiling* (NY: Chick Flick Productions, 2003) focusing on the Women's United Soccer Association careers and World Cup aspirations of twins Lorrie and Ronnie Fair, China's Gao Hong and Nigeria's Mercy Akide.

<sup>14</sup> The Women's World Cup and Women's Olympic Football Tournament are the most influential events both because of their backing by FIFA and the IOC but also because the absence of professional leagues in all but a few countries means that a European Cup, or other Confederation cups, for women's club teams, are much more recent developments. In this sense, other than playing for one's club in a given national league, women players are more likely to represent their country as amateur or semi-professional than as a fully professional athlete though this is slowly changing, and there are exceptions which have preceded and succeeded WUSA. Nevertheless the foreign draft system of that league was a significant extension of a degree of professionalism for women players and coaches in an independent women's league.

sation with a co-ordinated international match calendar, an increase in the number of teams participating in the Women's Olympic Football Tournament Beijing 2008 from 10 to 12 and an increase in the number of women eligible for World Player rankings. However, the proposed re-scheduling of FIFA Women's World Cup commencing 2010 with the Olympic Games to follow in 2012 which would have enabled a two year space between the major events for female elite players did not take effect. This would appear to maintain the place of women's competitions in relation to the relative men's events which may, or may not, change after the men's World Cup in 2010. So conservative views about the secondary status of women's sport in competition, budget matters and in the media remain persistent and influential.

### The Term 'Women's Football': Problems of Definition

In academia meanwhile, there is now a legitimate sub-discipline of gender politics and sport and an increasing literature on women's football. Having said that, there are perhaps a dozen books on women's football that could be regarded as a skeleton bibliography, amongst them important case studies, theoretical works and biographies of key individuals in the creation of aspects of the social history of the women's game, to which we can add significant PhD theses, journal articles and book chapters. So having indicated the emerging field, one of the questions to ask is why the paucity of material? Why is there only very recently sufficient recognition of the phenomenon of women's football to make a conference of this nature a platform for debate?

This marginalisation is not new and has been slow to change and so I share concerns with many of those who are beginning to question the use of the term 'women's football' and what that implies. The fact remains that football for women and girls is not a taken for granted activity across Britain, across an expanding European community, or in a global context. The search for respectability as a female appropriate sport remains, especially at a professional level, even in countries such as the USA where numbers of female participants approach or exceed their male counterparts. In the broader context of a swiftly changing world economy, women's football in the present era attempted to establish itself on an international stage during a time when the sport as a whole has become increasingly visible.<sup>15</sup> There is now a platform for those interested in the politics, history, sociology, law, philosophy and economics of what has come to be called 'women's football', including those of us who resist the simplicity of terms such as these.

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<sup>15</sup> There is little evidence, though, to support the women's game as dependent upon rapid economic growth, either within nations or across the globe.

Throughout history humans have made distinctions between 'them' and 'us' on the basis of real and imagined differences and sporting tradition has been built upon this. My central concern is with institutional and organizational discrimination; that is, where bureaucracies, associations, governments and EU partners, justify both a philosophy and a practice that discriminates against a particular group. Most training and games are organised on the basis of football (taken to include male youth players) and women's football (taken to include girls). There are significant pockets of mixed competitive play; most notably adult co-ed leagues in the United States, elements of youth sport in Europe and Asia where mixed play is up to age 18, and various gradations of mixed football as a game only for children (where the age limit is interpreted according to the context but is often age 12). This variety of regular participation exists under the radar as it were, compared to relatively high profile cases which make the press regarding football and gender.<sup>16</sup>

It seems that we are asking the wrong questions if we make the focus of enquiry the means by which we might increase the number of girls and women playing football; and the mechanisms by which we get the media to cover female matches more extensively; and the market for and desirability of a more prestigious women's professional league in Europe. These are cosmetic features of more fundamental concepts and values embodied by the division in the men's and women's game. So the more informal aspects of leisure and play which includes mixed soccer unrecognised by bureaucracies is something that could be more explored but is not the focus here. What does concern me is the ideological mystification of sport so that we make exceptions in competitive, modern organised games that we do not accept in other areas of our lives.

One of the problems of course is that we have an uneasy integration of women's committees, departments and sections within existing administrations for men's football. There are historic reasons for this which are too numerous to elaborate here but suffice to say that those women's associations which preceded the recognition of women's football by FIFA have gradually given way over the last thirty or so years to become committees within male administrative structures or are recognised as affiliated to these bureaucracies. With the notable exception of Norway, this absorption is partial and particular. For example there is usually a women's committee in which the majority of women's representatives cluster, gender representation on the other committees of FIFA, for example, are less well mixed.

At the launch of the Los Angeles Declaration Josephine King, General Secretary of the Oceania Football Confederation (OFC), said that women administrators should be able to move beyond women's football to head up key positions in the sport as a whole. Karen Espelund asked at the same symposium when we would say football and mean both male and female players. We are

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<sup>16</sup> David Pannick. *Sex Discrimination in Sport* (London: Equal Opportunities, 1983).

some way off those positions seven years on. If you remain unconvinced of the partial nature of this integration, have a look at the web sites which reflect the different faces of football. The website of UEFA, for example, has Club, National, Youth, Women's and Futsal listed under 'other competitions' with the UEFA Champions League, the UEFA Cup and UEFA Euro 2008, the premier tournaments, and hence deserving of their own links. It may be recently that the women's section has moved to the professional and competition department to maximise commercial opportunities but this specialist niche in national and international administrations raises three key questions.

First, why should we expect sport to be fair and equal when other aspects of our lives are not? Britain is failing to provide real opportunity and choice for young people entering training and work according to "Free to Choose" the final report from the Equal Opportunities Commission investigation into sex segregation in training and work. Of course, each country is different and some of the European countries with the most progressive legislation were represented in the UEFA women's 2005 tournament. Nevertheless, in spite of increasing numbers of female players, women's football remains primarily an amateur sport. If we focus on football as a professional sport and as an example of training and work, this kind of sex segregation appears linked to a broader pattern which the EU has tried to combat by gender mainstreaming. Without wishing to under-estimate the influence of those relatively more progressive countries on EU policy or to over estimate the influence of British attitudes to women in the sport, it remains to demystify some of the fuzzy logic of 'average men' and 'average women' that David Pannick criticised so well back in 1983.<sup>17</sup>

My point of course is that we need to ask more robust questions about the values and ideas that have become common sense in this demarcation of football and women's football which marks the national and international image of the sport, however progressive legislation in individuals countries. The solicitude with which women are prevented from playing at the highest level in case of injury also disguises a hostility to personal choice. In effect, it infantilises women. The first woman who does sign for male team (whether she first of all has to go to court to invoke her right to do so) will be very brave. She will also have had to undergo a great deal of professional athletic training and so, like most sportspeople, will no more be 'like' the average non-athlete than her male counterparts. If she were to get a game and be injured then it would be a calculated judgement on her part whether the salary were worth the risk, the same as male professionals who are injured. The comparison with other areas of our culture such as education also makes a point that radical developments do not always follow on the back of more liberal change. In addition, the aims and tactics of those fighting for women's rights can be very, in this case, fun-

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<sup>17</sup> See Pannick, especially 11-13.

damentally, different. Without rehearsing the historical development of the game, it would seem optimistic to expect football authorities to examine these distinctions without academics debating them.

This line of argument risks alienating those who would use law and equity practices to argue for a redistribution of economic resources between men's and women's sports programmes and for those who would argue for more humane, less sexualized and inclusive values in sport. It may well horrify those fans of football who enjoy moaning about players' salaries in the Premiership but who would not risk increasing the pool of players to include women professionals. My response to the first two groups is to include myself among them and to say that we should be more radical in setting targets linked to resource and to look at how power is held and exercised rather than asking self-governing bodies of sport to set their own agendas. Yes, there is a sexualised element to male professional football, but not, it has to be said, for all players. There are issues around making sport more inclusive that it is better not to compartmentalise by successive initiatives. Gender is one of many priorities but it is also a defining element in the organisation of modern sport.

Secondly, in looking at EU sports law I have asked myself if sport is exempted from the prevailing political and civic cultures of our societies because of some special ideology which is protected by law and it would seem that there is something to this. In order to be really clear, I am not arguing that women have a right to resources regardless of the practicalities – and there would be pragmatic elements to address. Nevertheless, in other aspects of our lives we ask that women be treated without reference to gender. So no woman could claim the right to a place on a football team unless she were worthy of it on her playing merit, any more than a man would. We appear in sport to accept the principle of equal but different. We have seen in other areas of our cultures that when this is pursued in contexts where there are already structures in place that advantage one group, it is highly unlikely that equality will combine with separation, let alone be an outcome of it.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> The effect of the 1972 Title IX Equal Education Amendments Act legislation in the United States was to make college campuses the primary force in women's elite soccer in the US. By linking federal funding with an obligation to provide equality of opportunity educational opportunities, amongst them access to sports programmes, improved for girls and young women. In this broader context, soccer flourished as did the careers of individuals able to take advantage of the sports scholarships in colleges and universities. Though it has always been under threat, a danger which remains to this day, in conjunction with other legislation Title IX had the effect of tying finance to opportunity and gave recourse to the legal system should this be denied. Nevertheless, as has been shown with the English Sex Discrimination Act, legislature in itself is not necessarily useful until its application serves reform. The 1978 US government mandate to revise Olympic sporting programmes and structures had the intention of preventing discrimination in both the US Olympic Committee and sports federations as members of the umbrella body. However, disputes between US Soccer and the National Women's Team have subsequently shown how limited the effect of this Federal legislation can be.

In particular football bureaucracies should be asked for fiscal reform as well as administrative and legislative review. It would be interesting to collect reliable and accurate financial data upon which to base future decisions. If we are to be encouraged by the number of female participants, can we see evidence of moves toward data-based decision-making rather than anecdotal-based regulation? I think we could usefully draw more attention to this rather than being defensive about the business conditions which must operate if there were to be a professional women's league. No doubt sports bureaucracies do want to use women players to move into football's under-exploited markets and unfortunate as they may be, this seems to be the agenda behind recent comment by FIFA officials regarding the need for women players to look attractive and to draw in new sponsors from fashion and cosmetics, for example. It is part of the difficulty of the current situation that women players and administrators who hardly hold the majority of fiscal resource or status within the game are being asked to break into new markets as a way of justifying their place in the sport.<sup>19</sup>

This leads to my third question. If we allow sport to be exempted under the current circumstances, how real is the equality of competition, of opportunity and of resource allocation for women football players? There is indeed separation but not equality of opportunity or equity of outcome. Most of those women I have spoken to over the last ten years at elite and competitive levels, are extremely pragmatic and accept the idea of social justice in claims that women's football is catching up with the highly specialised and commercialised world of professional football. We may feel it unlikely, given the degree of focus on professional football, that this sport would provide social mobility and act as an agent of change in gender relations. Nevertheless, unless we wish to see another generation of women and girls struggling for chances to play a sport at the highest level that their skills merit, we have to question this idea of an average man and an average woman which seems to have passed into the way the sport is organised without sufficient critical evaluation.

You may feel unable to join in my view that equality of opportunity is only realisable if an individual is assessed by reference to his or her own attributes, but I would ask you to consider the myth of equality that attempts to preserve the character of football as a 'manly sport' by using the title 'women's football'. This seems to me to be romantic paternalism and to help discriminatory attitudes to persist. This is an historical construction dating back at least to 1902 when women in Britain were barred from organised mixed games and then in 1921 from competitive FA sanctioned games against other women. I hope to write in the future about a shift from acceptance of some rather absurd

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<sup>19</sup> The UEFA 2005 tournament was entitled "a more beautiful game" as the FA wanted to focus on the players marketability as females. See also: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport1/hi/football/women/> 17 June 2005 for a summary of UEFA president Lennart Johansson's claim that sponsors of women's football could cash in by promoting the players' physical attributes.

ideas about essentially female and male physicality to political use of athletic prestige in pursuit of women's rights. The statistical probability of landing a paying job in professional sport is bleak, the likelihood of establishing a professional women's league in the context that I have just described is a remote possibility. But we have to ask these questions so that football does not equate with winning and women's football mean taking part.

### Professionalism in a European Context: are There Unique Selling Points of Women's Soccer?

If we look at the growth of professionalism in the key European sports we find that clubs formed in the first instance for their members' recreation grew to become financially viable organizations run by business men and managers whose product happened to be football or rugby or motor racing and so forth. This is reflected in the urban geography of our cities where we can go to visit the Nou Camp, the Stade de France or Monza and, to an extent, in our rural geography with sports clubs visible across Europe. So from this there are three practical issues for the development of professional sports teams: the first the differentiation of playing and management personnel; the second, an economically sound entity capable of generating income; and finally, a sizable chunk of real-estate close to a well-populated area. Even if one were to accept the idea of football as the fastest growing sport for women, it is clear from this model that participation even at elite playing level has more similarities with amateur sport (though the US college system is obviously slightly different). What has been evident since Women's World Cup 1999 and the establishment of WUSA is that with shrewd marketing and strategic alliances with commercial and media partners, a women-only brand can achieve outstanding live and television audiences in its own right. With regard to Europe, to attract supporters wanting high quality football, means professional sport, and we know already how crowded that market is. Representative teams with ties to the local area, though they may be comprised of many foreign players, are also well established in major sports across Europe. The UEFA women's 2005 tournament was scheduled to stretch the football calendar during the short off-season of men's professional leagues – might this supplementary positioning be the future? If so, is it a desirable forecast?

Leaving aside the question of where the women's clubs would be located for the moment, the issues of 'community' and 'representativeness' are the two main points that would need to be addressed before any move toward professionalism could be made. Meanwhile the lack of women's own grounds has symbolic and practical implications with immediately recognizable effects for the marketing and commercial currency of women's sport. Regardless of the

'newness factor', the social and economic realities of a country-wide, or even a European-wide professional football league for women are not encouraging. As Women's USA also showed, the difference between launching and maintaining a franchise remains a challenging prospect. Football as a business activity has workers who are interchangeable and Boards of Directors who make decisions. This is something else we who are fans of the women's game have to be clearer about. Merely asking for support because women players *should be* encouraged is the sporting equivalent of eating our greens: we know it is worthy but it can be dull. That is not likely to engage the personality of supporters and is not what I see at women's tournaments whether they are held at international multi-entertainment arenas such as the Pasadena Rose Bowl in Los Angeles, in large stadia or on local parks. What happens on *those* football fields *matters* and it is that Unique Selling Point, so far under-capitalised, that remains to be imaginatively packaged.

To continue with the argument from a business point of view with regard to what has happened in England, a process of FA consolidation since 1993 has seen the demise of independent women's clubs at the top of the women's game. The arrangements have the appearances of the merger of a small business with much larger and more successful firms. While female participation has increased, in market terms the top UK independent women's teams with the exception of the Doncaster Rovers Belles, have increasingly lost their own distinctive identity and become part of the ambient community focus of Premiership and Football League Clubs. This merger has little to do with brotherly love and a lot to do with how women's teams have been funded over the last twelve years. Depending upon your point of view, this could be interpreted as a way of getting professional football to develop aspects of community involvement in the sport or maybe as a subtle means of citing and siphoning development money back into professional football at the same time as providing good PR for the representativeness of the relevant team. A professional women's league would need more than great players and love of football to succeed, it would need something markedly different to attract support, money and management. It would need a sense of community combined with an emotional element that provides a sense of pride in the television and live audience. However, if we look at the media presentation and representation of women, the broad issue of the invisibility of the female athlete and the particular attention given to trivialising women's football is striking. The WWC 1999 and 2005 UEFA tournament show that change is possible but key questions remain.

To move to the European context, the principle of equality in the European Union and the implications for women's football are a recent concern. Article 141 on equal pay for equal work in the General Framework on Equal Opportunities recognised that the principle of equality was a fundamental human right

which served economic as well as social purposes.<sup>20</sup> The concept of equality which has been adopted however, is more of a symbolic aim and political intent than a legally enforceable framework. Consequently the principle of non-discrimination is more likely to be enforced than the principle of equality which involves more positive intervention. Furthermore because of the way the principle of non-discrimination has been formulated broader ideas of equality, especially as they pertain to sport, are compromised by it.<sup>21</sup>

Given that the EU has adopted a non-discrimination model with a short list of prohibited grounds, equality has become a fundamental right of community law. It underpins the rights of the EU citizen and is a general aspirational principle of modern society. The Equal Treatment Directive is meant to reinforce “the irrelevance of a person’s sex with regard to the rules regulating relations in society”. However, this is given a largely rhetorical function and is particularly confusing when applied to sport. This is because we need to ask: equal to what?

Discrimination may be described as a distinction, whether intentional or not but based on grounds relating to the personal characteristics of the individual or group, which has the effect of imposing burdens, obligations or disadvantages on such individual or group not imposed upon others, or which withholds or limits access to opportunities, benefits, and advantages available to other members of society.<sup>22</sup> Do partitioned labour markets in sport contravene this and should we be asking for substantial change in the economic, social and cultural models which are at the root of inequalities?

In the administration of sport, the labour market is still broadly partitioned on the basis of gender in that female labour concentrates in lower positions in the occupational hierarchy.<sup>23</sup> Even though the principle of ‘equality’ is accepted, *in practice* as a vocational activity whether we are talking as professional sports people, as coaches, as administrators women are disadvantaged and under-represented at all levels in football across Europe. The idea of ‘difference’ is linked with this disadvantage and we should be asking questions about substantive equality and what positive action measures may be taken in

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<sup>20</sup> For the General Framework and more detailed aspects of Gender mainstreaming including the Framework strategy on equal opportunities for men and women (2001-2005) see “Action Programme on Equal Opportunities (2001-2005) and Financial Aspects”, online, internet, 11 April 2005, available <http://europa.eu.int/scadplus/leg/en/s02310.htm>.

<sup>21</sup> In September 2004 FIFA’s executive committee ruled, ‘there must be a clear separation between men’s and women’s football. This is laid down in league football and in international matches by the existence of gender-specific competitions, and the Laws of the Game and FIFA’s regulations do not provide for any exceptions’.

<sup>22</sup> “Action Programme on equal opportunities (2001-2005) and Financial aspects”, online, internet, 10 December 2005, available <http://europa.eu.int/scadplus/leg/en/s02310.htm>.

<sup>23</sup> We may be able to think for example of one or two women in international positions in elected and appointed roles in international bureaucracies, a handful of chief executives of clubs or leagues, one or two managing directors, owners and so forth but in terms of a critical mass of women these exceptions reinforce the general rule.

the current circumstance. The tension between facilitating international competition and the development of mass participation is the major challenge for the international federation as it continues to invest disproportionately in male football. The motif in wealthy countries such as the United States and in developing countries like Namibia is that whatever the actual resource available to a national football association, there remains a perception that there is not enough to fund women's football equally at elite or at participation levels. There is not room to include examples of this but one point is vital: that this statement is made with reference to the current situation regarding the numbers of female participants and the elite status of the women's game in each country. The point is not invalidated by saying that the total number and proportion of female participants do not compare with men's football.<sup>24</sup> The model whereby there is only so much football pie and to give some to the women's game would necessarily mean to take from the others a questionable premise on which to proceed.

### The Future is Feminine?

The future, in terms of FIFA priorities at least over the next few years, is Asia and women one of eleven target markets for football in Vision Asia. The question of femininity has been expressed in both general and specific forms. For example, in January 2004 Sepp Blatter, the President of the world governing body FIFA, was reported to have said women's kit should promote a more 'female aesthetic' in order to increase the popularity of the game. Some sources suggested he had made links with volleyball and tighter shorts, advocating the introduction of hotpants for women players. *The Guardian* (16 January 2004) reported Blatter as having said, "Female players are pretty, if you excuse me for saying so, and they already have some different rules to men – such as playing with a lighter ball. That decision was taken to create a more female aesthetic, so why not do it in fashion?" But a FIFA spokesperson said the translated remarks did not capture the spirit of the original interview in which Blatter had talked about the need for women's football to attract different sponsors, possibly from the fashion and cosmetics industries, rather than depend on sponsors from the men's game. The episode, whatever was said, does reflect a tension between the pragmatic elements of competition management and the so-called aesthetic image for the sport.

Conservative commercial expectations and practices, changing governmental and international federation policies regarding gender and systems of foot-

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<sup>24</sup> In a little is sometimes said a lot and Sue Lopez made an aside at the 2005 Women's football Conference about the recent growth in female participation that if you ban something for fifty years, then recognise it, the numbers are almost bound to rise.

ball bureaucracy are not by any means always progressive in intent or effect. The gender inequalities in football are so obvious that difference is part of the construction of male and female participation. But within that construction of difference, the examination of identities across case studies show that women's football has a wide variety of meanings to the extent that the diversity challenges the neat definition of 'football' and 'women's football'. There has been some very useful work on comparative interpretations in a European context.<sup>25</sup> This includes work on sociability and sexuality as well as sport-specific aspects of women's football. The variety of discourses that European women players use to describe their experiences of football are a useful starting point.<sup>26</sup> Varied studies have shown that internationally football carries values and meanings that are not static or constant, but are subject to change. As a globally popular sport, football is one of the most visible sites of tension between old and new values, between competing cultural and social models; in other words, football is a discursive ferment. In terms of physicality, femininity and the media it is not enough merely to complain that the media do not cover women's football enough and to ask them to do better – again we have to ask some precise questions. In the case of the British Press for example, which may be less enlightened than in other countries, some of our most respected sports writers indulge in stereotypes about female team sport. 'Like watching paint dry' is a British saying for a boring activity; for one of our best known sports reporters women's football was like watching dry paint.

In a UK study that found 5.9 % of sports reporting focussed upon women's sport, of that percentage, one third of those articles constituted photographs of Anna Kournikova, the tennis player.<sup>27</sup> I will leave it to the readers to look through the journals of broadcasting and electronic media for articles that show sport is not alone in the under-representation of women, for example on our TV and cinema screens. However sport seems to be particularly chauvinistic in both the scope and focus of its coverage. The standard of female play, in foot-

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<sup>25</sup> Christine Messesson and Jean-Paul Clement, "Homosociability and Homosexuality. The Case of Soccer Played by Women", *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 38.3 (2003): 311-330.

<sup>26</sup> Kari Fasting, Gertrud Pfister, Sheila Scraton, and A. Bunuel, "It is Still a Man's Game? The Experiences of Top-level Women Footballers in England, Germany, Norway and Spain", *International Review for Sociology of Sport* 34.2 (1999): 99-113; Kari Fasting and Gertrud Pfister, "Female and Male Coaches in the Eyes of Female Elite Soccer Players", *European Physical Education Review* 6.1 (2000): 91-110; Sheila Scraton, Kari Fasting, Gertrud Pfister, and A. Bunuel, "Cross-national Research on Women and Sport: Some Theoretical, Methodological and Practical Challenges", *Women in Sport and Physical Activity Journal* 6.1 (1997): 85-107; Sheila Scraton, "Researching the Sporting Lives of Women in European Countries", *Researching Women and Sport*, eds. G. Clarke, and B. Humberstone (London: McMillan, 1997) 183-199.

<sup>27</sup> Harris J., and B. Clayton, "Femininity Masculinity, Physicality and the English Tabloid Press: The Case of Anna Kournikova", *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 37.3 (2002): 397-413.

ball and a range of other sports, does not explain what is happening here. This is especially worrying for Black and Asian women athletes, and case studies which articulate the broader structural dynamics of gender and race are capable of opening up a broader understanding of identity politics but also the role of sports in black and Asian communities. I would like to see the “Kick it Out” campaign, which addresses racism in British Football, do more for women and girls players as it seems to be a fundamental oversight of the initiative and indicative of the tendency to compartmentalise initiatives. In our enthusiasm for the future of women’s football it is also necessary to look back because the history of women’s football is not all about the 1990s or the noughties.

Many of the players I have interviewed over the last decade spoke to myths about women and sport. I appreciate the integrity of what many of these women and girls had built because they devoted large amounts of time and energy to forming aspects of our social and cultural history – usually as volunteers. It seemed to me that the public recognition of these volunteers is lacking in the image we currently have of women’s football. Put simply, without these unpaid enthusiasts and their networks we would not have the base of participation on which professional sports development might build. This, it seems, goes far beyond England or Europe to count for several cases of countries which have a strong women’s football culture. I think it is right to critique even though it risks distancing the theoretical aspects of the research from those participants who have contributed and who are anxious about how this might affect the image of the sport.

Though Women’s World Cup Final 1999 was a red-letter day for disproving myths about live and media interest in women players, the tickets for the next Beijing tournament are more likely to be given away than highly prized. Intense excitement has given way to a less obvious position for women’s football globally and in Europe. In terms of international comparisons this tension has been very interesting. That is, in the formation of various teams, clubs, geographic, specialist leagues and associations the source of pride is collectivized competitive sport and this exists as an example of the common culture shared by all the players. Yet while each participants’ view is authentic to their particular case, the underlying values which have formed the conceptual system on which football and women’s football operate have become an everyday reality.