

A Game for Rough Girls?

A history of women's football in Britain

Jean Williams

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A Game for Rough Girls?

The result of several years of original research, the book traces the continuities in women's participation since the beginnings of the game, and highlights the significant moments that have influenced current practice. The text provides:

- insight into the communities and individual experiences of players, fans, investors, administrators and coaches,
- examination of the attitudes and role of national and international associations,
- analysis of the development of the professional game,
- comparisons with women's football in mainland Europe, the USA and Africa.

A Game for Rough Girls? is the first text to theorise properly the development of the game. Examining recreational and elite levels, the author provides a thorough critique, placing women's experience in the context of broader cultural and sports studies debates on social change, gender, power and global economics.

Jean Williams is a Senior Lecturer in Education in the School of History and International Studies at De Montfort University, Leicester. She is a consultant to media and sports organisations including FIFA, and is currently involved in a major cross-national research project into women's football.

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My largest obligation is to the women, men, girls and boys who participated in the research. They gave up their free time and welcomed me into their homes, clubs and social circles principally to celebrate their love of football and I have tried to capture some of their altruism and animation here. Collectors of women's football memorabilia to whom I am indebted include Gail Newsham, Jane Ebbage, Dr Colin Aldis, Sheila Rollinson, Peter Bridgett, Angela Henson, Elsie Cook, Winnifred Bourke, Nancy Thompson, Ali Melling, Clare Illand and Ruth Shuttleworth to name but a few. Obviously, though agreeing to help me, they do not necessarily share my opinions, so their generosity is all the more kind.

On a personal level my coach mentor, Jim Kelman, provided steadfast guidance, many an anecdote and generous advice. Jim is very much of the 'train hard and win easy' school and takes coach-education to the level of art form; typically with sayings oblique enough to make Eric Cantona and Sven Goran Eriksson envious, including: 'You can make a rabbit into a hard rabbit, but you can't make it into a fox.' Janet Sharman, entirely beyond the call of duty, helped with the layout and format of an early vision of the typescript. I am thankful for Janet's expertise and goodwill.

I would not have developed an interest in writing about football had I not had a considerable interest in the subject and though 'your friend in football' is a cliché, I have many acquaintances who I know purely through playing sport. Those individuals are too numerous to list so I prefer simply to express my appreciation and look forward to seeing them again soon.

I would, however, like to make special mention of those close to me who either actively dislike, or are not interested in football, particularly Lorna, Daryl, Deborah and Margaret, as they have lived through this project with me and now know rather more about the subject than they would like.

Finally, I would like to thank my family; particularly my parents for taking the trouble to provide me with four co-competitors (and my brothers and sister for expanding the squad). I could not have completed this project without the backing of my mother in the early stages; as one of my favourite later memories is of her riding a bike across a rickety bridge whilst almost in her seventies it is easy to see where I got my interest in physical activity from. In the circumstances it is hardly surprising that I grew up kicking a ball, racing go-karts, riding ponies, trying to be Olga Korbut and practising spin bowling. Though at the time we very much had the attitude that it was the winning, not the taking part, that counted, I have remained involved as an average amateur, rather than a successful specialist, ever since. In the period of writing up I also lost a close friend and team-mate, who, to the untutored eye, looked like the archetypal South American striker. However, Karl Lathbury's love of life was much more honed than his football skills and his generosity of spirit is missed to the extent that we now talk nostalgically of his scything tackles. My biggest personal debt, however, is to Simon who has provided patient and practical encouragement and support in this project, as in everything else, and it is to him that I dedicate this book.

Abbreviations

AIAW	Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women
BUSA	British University Sports Association
CAAWS	Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women in Sport
CAF	Confédération Africaine de Football
ESFA	English Schools Football Association
FACA	Football Association Coaches' Association
FA	Football Association [English]
FAI	Football Association of Ireland
FAW	Football Association of Wales
FAWPL	Football Association Women's Premier League
FIFA	Fédération Internationale de Football
IAPESGW	International Association of Physical Education and Sport for Girls and Women
IOC	International Olympic Committee
LFAI	Ladies' Football Association of Ireland
LTA	Lawn Tennis Association
MLS	Major League Soccer
NAIA	National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics
NCAA	National Collegiate Athletic Association
NIWFA	Northern Ireland Women's Football Association
NSSU	Namibian Schools Sports Union
PFA	Professional Footballers' Association
SFA	Scottish Football Association
SWFA	Scottish Women's Football Association
UAU	University Athletic Union
UEFA	Union of European Football Associations
USSF	United States Soccer Federation [abbreviation also used to denote US Soccer Foundation]
WCA	Women's Cricket Association
WFA	Women's Football Association

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WFAI	Women's Football Association of Ireland
WNBA	Women's National Basketball Association
WRFU	Women's Rugby Football Union
WUSA	Women's United Soccer Association

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Introduction

'The future is feminine', declared Joseph Blatter, the General Secretary of the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), the international governing body of football, in 1995. This pronouncement in *FIFA News*, the official publication of the association, effectively included women players in the family of football on behalf of the worldwide community. At the same time, Blatter, arguably the most powerful man in world football at the time, was careful to distinguish their place within that family. Female players contributed 'a distinctive style of play, characterised by a certain elegance which has prevailed over a more robust impersonation of the man's game' (Blatter, 1995).¹ If the place of the announcement was significant, so too was the timing. There had already been two Women's World Cups (China in 1991 and Sweden in 1995) and the inaugural Olympic women's competition was scheduled for the Atlanta Games in 1996. Blatter's epigram captured women's football as successfully established and with tremendous potential for growth but was otherwise, and perhaps deliberately, vague.

Football as a sport, business and cultural trend is a highly visible aspect of popular culture in 'New Britain' and against this background a feminine bias appears highly unlikely. The competing rights of fans, professionals and investors are widely debated in the academic and popular press. In contrast, the entitlements of women players and administrators are not generally discussed. Most British people could name a male football star whether or not they consider themselves to be enthusiasts of the sport. The majority of self-confessed football fans could not name a female player. Such differences clearly pose a challenge to any assumption about football being either England's national game, or the world's most popular sport. What we have instead are various communities of players, fans, investors, administrators and so on with significant points of reference. Some of these groups work professionally in football, others volunteer their time and interest and, of course, affiliation and alliance network across this divide. The starting point for this project was to explain how communities of women football players are embedded within, and interact across, a surrounding cultural context over and above football as a sport or a business. Any analysis of women's football has to go beyond attempts by FIFA and

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national associations to engineer female participation. Indeed, one of the challenges for the apparently confused bureaucracies is that dealing with women as players proposes a series of working relationships across different football entities. Should women be fully integrated across the current structures or should they be treated as a distinct branch of the family tree?

The discussion in Part I begins by looking at the production of women's football culture. Women's participation at local, regional and national level is explored in terms of football's development, women's sport and social change to ask how we have arrived at this moment of obvious inequality in Britain. If the invention of tradition has been used to create communities and these practices transmitted by memory, then how can the production of culture in women's football be characterised? Chapter 1 outlines the construction of tradition in women's football before moving on in Chapter 2 to discuss community and, finally, in Chapter 3, memory. Part I as a whole argues that structural and organisational constraints shaping women's access to football are only a part of the picture and there is much more work to do in uncovering the meanings and values that women bring to playing the game in a culture of production.

Part II opens out the discussion to look outside football as a sport and a business in order to consider what is going on within it. By looking at the meanings that are given to football in equal opportunities legislation and in segregated employment opportunities for men I'm suggesting a shift towards wider questions about British culture. The marginalisation of women in football has yet to be contested in any sustained and systematic way, even by players themselves. The recent apparent increase of interest on behalf of women is embedded in a context of national, regional, ethnic, religious and linguistic affiliation and the expression of identity through forms of football. Women who choose to play the game are always in the process of translating and mediating these identities in addition to gender. How do the male/female and heterosexual/homosexual 'roles' and stereotypes that can be found in football translate into other, broader patterns of practice? What aspects will affect the potential professionalisation of football for women and how will gender, sexuality and the taboos around mixed contact sport create patterns which shape the presentation of women players to a potential audience?

Part II also questions the extent to which women's football can be understood to be a globally popular game. For the minority of women who choose to play, and for the majority who do not, football is more than a sport or recreation. FIFA and the Olympic movement, as professional and occupational communities, have given women's football a specific form through working practices that have been changed little by the incorporation of women into those systems. The resilience of the structures to change and to accommodating women as decision-makers is therefore another facet of the construction of women's football.

The discussion includes women making football cultures in other countries in order to highlight the typical and the unusual elements of the

English case. The aim is, first, to move away from the idea that women's football can be understood by the engineered and corporate perspective of national and international sports associations and second, to see what areas of continuity thread through the different case studies. How are the practices of various kinds of football for women shaped by these large sporting bureaucracies?

In summary, to comprehend the place of women's football in contemporary society it is necessary to consider the broader patterns that intersect with it. So the focus of this work is specifically about the construction of a women's football culture, but it is also about women's football within English culture. The 'politics' of football have been discussed as a struggle of consumption and production both inside and outside the corporate entertainment industry. In analysing both the past and the potential for women's football in the future, then the consequences of increased bureaucratic monitoring and intervention has to be set alongside the large degree of independence that the majority of players and administrators have enjoyed because this interference is so very recent. Women's football has been experienced in various ways: as a form of collective leisure, as a sports community and as an administrative category to name but a few. Women players have invented and defined football in specific forms, spaces and places. The distance between these sites and the interests and agendas of the bureaucrats is an issue that the book begins to address and one that future researchers will refine.

What are the components of women's football that the researcher should compile at any given period? In terms of methodology, I have tried to capture what is evident at women's matches, be they tournaments and league fixtures or impromptu games. It is very clear on these occasions that there are diverse aspects of women's football created across complex amalgams of identity including the way that people dress, behave, talk and interact. It is not, therefore, appropriate to use concepts and methodologies that in any way collapse differences or to introduce players via a series of labels as, say, 35 years of age, married with two children and living in the south. This will frustrate readers keen to draw conclusions about the social background of players but the intention is to allow simultaneously the participants to speak for themselves and in doing so, to criticise simplistic attempts to characterise the women's football community.

Oral history and ethnographic methods helped to compare the world of the participants with depictions of women football players. Quantitative evidence is part of this story but cannot, in itself, account for the reasons why women play football. Furthermore, an emphasis on this kind of analysis would deny the complexities that the study sought to capture and could be used to construct an uncomplicated picture of the increase in women's access to various aspects of football. In any case, my access to collections of data was usually through indirect means or personal introduction. The representations and perspectives which English society has of women

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football players, including the views of players and administrators, are not held in centralised archives as such and so the methodology reflects the topic itself.

There is more to women's relationship with football than academics have so far described.² What has never been satisfactorily explained elsewhere is a peculiarly English expression of contempt for women who play football. A contemptuous attitude may not only exist in England but it is for another work to describe the precise role of the exportation of the attitude. For this discussion, the perspective has persisted in one form or another for at least a century but has been juxtaposed in the last forty years by an increase in international and domestic interest in women's football. Though the major focus of the argument deals with events from the last forty years, an examination of the recent historical period would be incomplete without considering early development. Britain pioneered the first phase of women's football's during, and shortly after, World War I. The most eminent team, Dick, Kerr Ladies, travelled to Europe, Canada and the United States to play, and audiences of tens of thousands watched women's games. British women's football led the world at this time. The considerable spectator support and media interest from that period is noticeably absent in the present. At home, since the 1960s, large crowds and media interest are not big parts of the women's game but participation rates are considerably higher. At elite level, since the middle of the 1980s, the English national team has gradually become less successful and other countries have progressively overtaken them in international influence.

The axiom that has come to describe women's football generally over the last decade is that it is 'The fastest growing participation sport for women.' Early use of this phrase by the English Women's Football Association (WFA) in the press was instructive (Jardine, 1992). In some senses 1992 marked a watershed; the last of twenty-three years of WFA control before the English Football Association (FA) took control of women's football. The association had been formed on behalf of women and was mainly staffed by volunteers like Flo Bilton, Linda Whitehead and Sue Lopez. But in more significant ways it was a hand-over rather than a take-over. Since its formation in 1969, the association had been led by men who wanted the FA to acknowledge, accept and administer women's football. Sloganeering in the national press was good public relations but the WFA had acted as a pretty leaky umbrella for the sport since 1985. Members were repeatedly asked to leave the 'character assassination of bygone days to the past. Sadly for all of us it lingers on . . . we must start again and implement constructive policies. If we fail our number will decline further' (Stearn, 1987:1).

So the growth in numbers has been neither steady nor unproblematic. For example, the WFA introduced a national league as recently as 1991, the first in the history of English women's football and a crucial step in adopting the structures of the male game. Why and how did women organise play

before this time? There seem to be two distinct but interrelated aspects of the idea of a 'fastest growing sport'. The first is that it emphasises consumption: women are *doing* football in increasing numbers we are told. The ways that women own, use and appreciate football are not incorporated into this narrative. The second is that this superficiality tends towards a discussion of an expression of female interest that is recent and has been successfully met.

Women playing football in increasingly large numbers is not a phenomenon specifically of the 1990s. Richard Holt's *Sport and the British* made a point which encapsulated the experience of players consulted for this research and which applied just as much in the 1920s as it did in the 1990s. His central theme is 'The extraordinary degree to which [sport] has been promoted privately . . . People have created their own kinds of pleasure through sport' (Holt, 1989: 346). How do women players view football? Blanket claims for a 'feminine future' and 'women's increased participation' imply that the experience of female players is in some ways similar. Did elite and competitive women and girls view themselves as part of a group of 'women football players' or as individuals?

There remains no single archive for women's football. The WFA minutes and materials were misplaced at the point of take-over or are otherwise unavailable. Records are scattered in various private collections and so it is perhaps unsurprising that some academics suggest that there has been little say about it as a sport, commercial undertaking or as a social activity. Previous accounts of women playing have fallen into two camps. Williams and Woodhouse (1991: 100) and later Holt and Mason (2000: 12) correlate the bureaucratisation of women's football with progress. The second approach has been to focus on the contentious aspects of women's football.³ There have been a few very useful discussions of body image and sexuality from a European perspective (Fasting *et al.*, 1998) and in the United Kingdom (Caudwell, 1999). But the lack of readily available sources proposes questions beyond these lines of enquiry. For example, why is the number of women who play football important to particular agencies and individuals? There is considerable difficulty in knowing how many female players we are talking about at any one time. What is the relationship between the enthusiasts and the governing body of the day? Why is there no central collection of data?

Administrators, players, coaches and supporters of the women's game have been enormously generous with their time and access to collections of memorabilia during the writing of this book. If identifying these serious amateurs led to many a cross-country paper chase, the warmth of the reception always made the journey worthwhile. Meeting with them as individuals and groups has confirmed my view that the question of a community of women players with traditions and shared memories is an area with considerable scope for further study. The pursuit of physically competitive leisure outdoors by women in football is not just economically and geographically