



Matthew Riley

HER GAME TOO

**A MANIFESTO
FOR CHANGE**

**Foreword by
Tracey Crouch CBE**

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1.

The Euros. Don't Watch Women's Football

YOU MAY have heard. There was a football tournament in England this summer. The England team took on and beat all comers through irrepressible force (Norway) sheer guts and determination against a technically gifted and tactically advanced Spain (until their coach's bizarre substitution decisions) and showed how far their game has advanced when dismantling a largely amateur Northern Ireland. Plenty about that final to come ... Stadiums have been packed, television audiences have smashed records (for that England and Spain game it peaked at 7.6 million plus 1.5 million BBC streams) and games often full of technical and physical mastery have described dramatic and compelling story arcs. There were 9.3 million BBC viewers and two million streams for the semi final meant record keepers were updating faster than those cat furiously typing memes. So here I am 100 words into the paragraph and I only mentioned the 'w' of wins and not of 'women' Why? I never watch women's football. I watch the beautiful game played by artists like De Bryne or Bronze, defensive titans like Bright or Van Dijk and daydream achievers like Kane or Stanway.

Now with the broadest of platforms, increasing seasons of elite training and financial security in their legs, lungs

and minds, the hype comes from the contest (and THAT backheel) instead of being fuelled by hope. When alking to *The Athletic's* Sarah Shephard in July 2022, consummate presenter Gabby Logan admitted that had been previously, especially for the 2007 World Cup in China, it had been a challenge, 'being really enthusiastic about something but knowing that it's not quite there yet'. The Euros have been a case study in 'build it and they will come'. Not only is the product on offer now consistently of the highest quality, but there was reassuring normality walking into our local pub with all the screens showing Germany beating Austria. Drinkers ridiculed Austrian keeper Manuela Zinsberger for gifting the Germans a second goal because of her decision-making rather than chromosome count, which lowers the temperature of conversations and creates normality in evaluating the action over the actors.

FIFA 23. Don't Play Women's Football

The next FIFA iteration expands to include the WSL and French Division 1 Féminine for the first time. The game's cover features two players, Kylian Mbappé and Sam Kerr, and also adds the Women's World Cup in Australia and New Zealand. To be fair to EA Sport, women have been included since 2015, but with only a smattering of international sides and, in FIFA 22, the profile had evolved to include 17 international squads and increasing access to features like Pro Club modes allowing thumb twiddlers to create a female player. Previous efforts invited talk of gender tokenism, but FIFA 23 (the 30th and final edition created by EA Sport) should help lay that to rest. Like so many of the issues surrounding the women's game, success will come when no one (apart from apoplectic keyboard warriors) even notices their player or team's gender and focusses their ire on poor defending or missed open goals.

Euro 2022. Don't Ruin Women's Football

In his predictably eviscerating and affirming article on 18 July 18th John Nicholson described this tournament as, 'like a filter for the dickheads who spoil football for the rest of us'. Echoing a phrase Boris Johnson used to berate Putin (sorry to drag him in, John), the 'toxic masculinity' that often blights our matchday experiences drives the atmosphere down to the lowest common denominator of a drink/drug-fuelled bear pit where the 'it's only banter' defence is trotted out for a range of reprehensible behaviours. Railing against what he sees as a world becoming more conflicted and confrontational, Nicholson sees the women's game as an instructive inversion of these testosterone-fuelled trends.

The inclusive, welcoming and supportive atmosphere we feel at Exeter City Women FC is a window into the women's game and fuels the Euros. Free from boorish and belligerent posturing, Euros crowds also reminded me of my time working in Thai football where families would see games as a chance to enjoy each other's company, knowing they were safe from having to explain to granny what a 'pedo' was or why we are all encouraged to 'shit on the City'.

Nicholson's key point is punishingly telling. The overwhelming dominance of men in general and a particular male demographic in particular feeds on itself with a race to the bottom of general unpleasantness cloaked in the lie that this is what real support looks like. The Euros crowds had a balance: of age, gender and orientation so that abuse has no room to breathe, fester and explode like some inky boil but is stifled at source. Nicholson draws a powerful image of those who prefer male dominance and a carte blanche for cretins, describing those who feel he is a woolly 'woke' bleeding heart liberal as watching on with:

'faces angrily twisted like an inflamed hernia, indignant that someone is neutering their desire to piss in gardens and insert flaming objects into their rectum'.

It used to be a simple logic about the women's game that, with so few fans watching, the mob didn't get a chance to rule. But, with its exponential growth, the women's game has not switched off its 'dickhead filter' and Nicholson's article climaxes with the sadness this joyous new footballing world has engendered in the men hell-bent on dumb weekend behaviour. We could have had this in the men's game. In Thailand, crowd violence is often driven by politics, but when Granny sits next to you and your daughter is on your knee, the civilising power of women creates a welcoming and intoxicating atmosphere (especially after sampling the local Thai beers). Gabby Logan describes women's football to *The Athletic's* Sarah Shephard as 'a beautiful evolution to watch' that mirrors the world we live in, or aspire to. 'Football reflects so many attitudes in society. Sometimes I think it reflects where we are as a civilisation in terms of attitudes and how important subjects like racism and homophobia are handled. If football treats it seriously then it sends a really strong message. That's why the women's game being so much more professional is really important in terms of women's sport generally and women's access to things they want to do in society.'

Be My Plus One

The path to parity may feel dauntingly long, but there is a fiendishly simple and massive step we can all make. When we go to our next Exeter City Women or Larkhall Athletic, Chelsea or Aston Villa game just bring one other person with you. Clubs could give the plus ones a free single, double or treble match voucher to thank them and, like a cheap Ryanair ticket where an empty seat is replaced by a customer open to purchase, food, merchandise or matchday programmes can help boost coffers and build atmospheres.

With the women's season around the corner, each league can, like EFL website templates, corporately and consistently

encourage fans to bring a friend and share their experiences, with regular reminders built into their online messages. Lionesses promoting lower-level clubs they started with could reflect Alessia Russo's decision to give her shirt to young fan Nancy Richardson after she held up a sign to the queen of backheels highlighting the team both of them played for:

'Russo I play at Bearsted, please can I have your shirt?'

I admit my club bias, but I strongly feel that building from the bottom up is the key here. The much-mentioned 'football pyramid' cannot survive if the disparity between the Lioness legends and those in the third and fourth tiers is allowed to become an unbridgeable gap. Coventry United, that I talk about later, are the red flags that warn us not to tread the risky financial path many of the lower league men's teams have taken but to pursue a culture of fan-driven inclusivity driving universal growth over top-heavy conspicuous spending.

So look around your family, friendship groups and neighbourhoods and, as a famous philosopher didn't say:

'The journey of a thousand fans begins with a single text'.

Ode to Joy

As a lecturer in marketing, I'm jealous of Leigh Moore who, when moving from his marketing role at the FA in 2012, coined the term 'Lionesses'. No more clunky stumbling sentences. A clean, resonating brand was born that needed no explanation or qualification. And that brand is, in the words of The Greeter's Guild's Troy Hawke, 'smashing it'.

So to the final. Where to start? When the game kicked off, how about the matchday programme on the Amazon Hot New Release chart at number four (above *The Football Yearbook* and Zlatan's autobiography)? Or a crowd of 87,192: a record for a Euros final (men or women). Maybe the 101 new grassroots girls and women's teams created by a single tournament sponsor? The data is dazzling but, as heady as these figures are, there is something more profound at play

here. It feels like the game has, finally, grown up. Instead of being an increasingly unsustainable echo chamber of stale ideas, joy has smashed down barriers built up over centuries by male, pale and stale cartels closing their minds to half the population. There was just time for Caz and Lucy to meet up with England legend Sue Smith (who wore a Her Game Too badge for the day) before diving into the infectious, rambunctious, life-affirming joy that climaxed on 31 July 2022.

Like life, football is a perpetual pursuit of fleeting perfection. But that Sunday afternoon served up all the elements of joy to keep these dark days of Russian bombs and rising bills at bay. The game was officiated by Ukrainian Kateryna Monzul four months after she'd fled her home in Kharkiv and lived underground at her parents' house for five days before making the arduous journey across Europe to take shelter in Germany; her nationality and story resonated, but she was here on merit. Just like our lionesses. Playing with an outsized Her Game Too flag positioned behind one of the Wembley goals was validation of the hard yards my HGT legends have volunteered in the face of bitter jealousy from a foetid male minority. But, once the festival of joy was given full freedom, it was time for calm concentration and to write the tournament's conclusion.

The game was the story of women's football. Nerve-shredding moments that flirted with failure but, ultimately, basked in glorious success. Despite going behind and losing their talismanic striker Alexandra Popp to injury in the warm-up, Germany purred with finely honed precision as they explored fault lines in the English defence. After a dominant second half, they found their moment and, with 11 minutes left, carved out a beautiful goal worthy of their stunning style. Only 11 heads remained unbowed but then, after 111 sapping minutes, Chloe Kelly pounced on a moment of fortune in the German box to calmly poke home a goal that

will resonate through generations. That moment transformed women's football from the back page to the front page and meant it can now turn a new page. Among the legion of content, this joke summed up what the women had done:

'Men:

Football's coming home!! It's coming home!!
It's coming!!

Women, 60yrs later: ... FFS I'll get it myself.'

Alex Scott, who has seen first-hand the evolution of the beautiful women's game, struck the perfect tone for those suddenly deciding that women's football is worthy of their attention:

'We begged so many people to back us, and they weren't brave enough. I'm not standing up at corporate events any more begging people to get involved in the women's game. You know what? If you're not involved, you missed the train. We left the station without you.'

What heightens the intensity of this glorious kaleidoscope of community is how this represents nothing more than the end of the beginning. Let me tell you more ...