

A photograph of three female football players in action, celebrating with their arms raised. The player in the center is wearing a yellow jersey and has her mouth wide open in a shout. The player on the left is wearing a white England jersey with the number 8. The player on the right is wearing a red jersey. The background is a vibrant red with a subtle pattern of white and yellow circles.

"A FANTASTIC AND UNIQUE INSIGHT
INTO THE WORLD OF WOMEN'S
FOOTBALL IN ENGLAND."

JACQUI OATLEY,
SPORTS PRESENTER AND JOURNALIST

THE
ROAR
OF THE LIONESSES

Women's Football in England

Carrie Dunn

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Prologue

IT'S a pleasantly warm August afternoon, and I'm at Wembley with tens of thousands of other football fans. None of us are there to cheer on England's men, or any of the Premier League stars. It's the FA Women's Cup Final, held at the new national stadium for the very first time, and attended by 30,710 people.

I'm in the press box, as I often am for domestic women's football matches, but this time, rather than sharing the space with one or two others, the place is packed. I'm co-commentating for the radio, but we're not the only broadcast team there – there's a huge demand all over the country for live coverage and regular updates from this match. Former England internationals are serving as pundits on other stations; journalists unused to the women's game are ensuring their notes are all in order; it's a frantic and busy day.

I'm working, but there are dozens of my friends and relatives in the crowd enjoying a day out in north-west London. None of us has any allegiance to either Chelsea or Notts County, the two teams playing today, but everyone wanted to show their support for women's football after enjoying the Women's World Cup so much during the summer of 2015.

They weren't the only ones. Attendances at FA Women's Super League games – the elite domestic competition for

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women's football in England – increased by 48 per cent following the Women's World Cup, according to the FA's official figures.

I was lucky enough to fly out to Canada and follow England's progress, reporting on matches and interviewing players for a national newspaper as well as an international sports website. There weren't that many English journalists out there from the off, beginning with the group games in tiny east-coast town Moncton; after all, women's international football tournaments on another continent come fairly low down the news agenda priorities for sports desks.

It was the second Women's World Cup I had travelled to and written about, following 2011's tournament in Germany. The entire event in Canada felt a bit smaller than the exuberant, high-profile celebration of women's sport we'd had four years previously. Oddly, it also felt much more commercial; the sponsors' logos seemed much more prominent around the host towns and cities and within the stadia. Despite that, I was delighted that friends, colleagues and acquaintances – some of whom had never expressed interest in any sport before, let alone women's football specifically – were asking me about the tournament. The media coverage in England gathered momentum along with the team; Lucy Bronze's magnificent strike against Norway was replayed again and again on news bulletins and grabbed people's attention, and once they found themselves watching a match, they also found themselves caught up in a tournament they never expected to follow.

Not even the post-midnight kick-off times put them off. After England were knocked out of the tournament by Japan courtesy of a late Laura Bassett own goal, my phone began buzzing with texts and my social media notifications lit up, all from people in England who were watching the match and wanted to reflect on it. That was happening all around the UK; indeed, during the third-place play-off, the website for the FA Women's Super League crashed due to

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demand. Full-page adverts expressing support for the team were published in the latter stages of the tournament; the top of the BT Tower in London carried a good luck message on the day of the semi-final.

Towards the end of the tournament's group stages I had been a guest on a BBC Radio 5 Live programme with a panel of journalists who specialised in women's football; we all agreed that the team's target would be the quarter-finals and anything beyond that would be a bonus. England exceeded those expectations, finishing third and in the process beating Germany for the first time ever. It was no wonder that people wanted to go to Wembley and welcome back those players who'd been a key part of Mark Sampson's squad of Lionesses.

The FA Women's Cup Final was a delightful showpiece occasion, all in all. After it was over, with Emma Hayes's excellent Chelsea side lifting the trophy, I trekked up the road to catch my bus home, and hoped once more that the increased interest in women's football in England would continue.



In the mainstream media and the popular histories, women's football did not take off in England until 1993, when the FA took control of it. This narrative overlooks so much. It ignores the fact, first of all, that the governing body actually banned women from playing the game. After a warning issued to men's clubs in 1902, warning them not to play against 'ladies' teams', the edict was passed down in 1921 and the prohibition lasted for half a century.

The reasons for the ban were multiple. The FA's minutes record their rather stiffly expressed justifications thus:

'Complaints having been made as to football being played by women, the Council feel impelled

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to express their strong opinion that the game of football is quite unsuitable for females and ought not to be encouraged.

‘Complaints have also been made as to the conditions under which some of these matches have been arranged and played, and the appropriation of receipts to other than charitable objects.

‘The Council are further of the opinion that an excessive proportion of the receipts are absorbed in expenses and an inadequate percentage devoted to charitable objects.

‘For these reasons the Council request clubs belonging to the association to refuse the use of their grounds for such matches.’

‘Unsuitable for females’? Perhaps this is the most predictable objection to women’s sport; indeed, the allegation that sport is physically dangerous for women continues even in the 21st century. Gian-Franco Kasper, president of the International Ski Federation, was asked in 2005 about the limitations placed on women’s ski jumping competitions, and he answered, ‘It’s like jumping down from, let’s say, about two metres on the ground about 1,000 times a year, which seems not to be appropriate for ladies from a medical point of view.’

The financial objections remain intriguing and have still not been fully explained. It is almost certain that the FA were referring obliquely to the most famous women’s team of the time, Dick, Kerr Ladies. A group of female workers at the factory enjoyed their kickarounds during their breaks, and in his office above, draughtsman Alfred Frankland saw an opportunity. He suggested that they form an organised team – and put himself forward as their manager.

The Dick, Kerr Ladies were more successful than anyone could have imagined. During the First World War, when the

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men's leagues were suspended, they (and teams like them) were attracting tens of thousands of fans to their matches – ostensibly to raise money for charities. Questions were, however, asked about the accounting practices of these clubs, as the FA's meeting appears to have done. Instead of asking to inspect the books, though, the FA issued a blanket ban on women playing football.

The Dick, Kerr Ladies were not even the first women's team. The intriguingly-pseudonymised Nettie Honeyball was the figurehead for the British Ladies, who played in the first recorded organised game of women's football back in 1895 (there were certainly games before that as well); this was held in London and contested between a team from the north and one from the south of England.

One plausible factor for the prohibition is not noted in the minutes, and that is the sheer success of women's football. Even after the Great War, the matches were still astonishingly popular. The Dick, Kerr Ladies took on St Helens Ladies at Goodison Park, the home ground of Everton, on Boxing Day 1920, in front of more than 53,000 people – with another several thousand hopeful attendees locked outside. Could it be that those governing English football were concerned that fans would be drawn to the women's game at the expense of the men's?

Whatever the genuine motives, the ban took effect; yet it did not destroy women's football. Women continued to play, regardless of the FA's decision to ignore their very existence. They could not play on proper football pitches so they found themselves playing at rugby clubs, or parks, or whatever piece of scrubland they could find. Men who helped the women's teams found themselves fined and suspended by the FA. Entirely separate from the governing body's control, women's football organised itself in the face of all these obstacles, forming the English Ladies' Football Association less than a week after the FA's declaration.

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Dick, Kerr Ladies became essentially a representative England team as they toured the world, sporting a Union Flag image on their kit. They had assumed this role even before the FA's ban, taking on a team from Scotland in 1920 – and crushing them 22-0. In the years following the prohibition, Frankland's team continued to travel and play, often against men, simply because there were reasonably few female opponents for them.

That was because other countries were facing similar problems to England, with the men's federations across the world trying to ignore women's football as best they could, and having reasonable success in starving it into oblivion; indeed, by 1947, just after the end of the Second World War, reports suggest that there were fewer than 20 women's clubs left in England, making it nigh-on impossible to stage regular games, but also meaning it was difficult for women who were interested in playing to find a club. These local teams had to play mostly exhibition games against each other depending on availability of players and a venue – but they also got the opportunity to travel the globe and play against teams from other countries. Manchester Corinthians, for example, enjoyed lengthy trips to Germany, Portugal, Madeira, Italy and Tunisia.

England's men winning the World Cup in 1966 generated more interest in the game, including from women. As more wanted to play, more clubs were established, often attached to a workplace and making use of their recreational grounds, and local leagues slowly began to take shape. In the absence of UEFA bothering itself about women's matches, the Federation of Independent European Female Football was established to organise international tournaments. This was a quango of businessmen seeing a decent commercial opportunity and they promptly launched plans for cross-Europe competitions as well as global ones. Harry Batt, the manager of women's team Chiltern Valley, was the man they

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invited to put together an England side. This all came as the Women's FA – separate from the FA itself, which was finally reconsidering its ban, and thinking about allowing women's teams to affiliate and compete officially, just as men's teams did – began to put down roots. Initially calling itself 'the Ladies' Football Association of Great Britain', it very much wanted to establish an official England representative side rather than Batt's invitationals. At this time, though, some other European countries were proving themselves more forward-thinking – there were some places where it was even possible for women to play football for money, albeit a very small amount. The Women's FA, though, just as authoritarian as its male counterpart, ruled that players who wished to be selected for England must retain their amateur status and refuse any potential moves abroad.

The Women's FA might have been good at making rules but it was not so good at organisation – whether that was matches, travel, funds or resources. Its job was made even tougher, strangely, by the FA finally agreeing to lift the ban on the women's game in 1970, allowing matches at football grounds and permitting referees to officiate, because it took so long to actually put those recommendations into practice.

FIFA and UEFA also realised they had to agree to endorse women's football if they were not to lose control of the game entirely, what with the international tournaments organised by FIEFF, but they were still unsure about what format their support should take. The WFA was extremely nervous about the independent proposals for a Women's World Cup to be held in England in 1972 or 1973; FIFA and UEFA had already rejected the ideas, expressing a concern that such a showcase of women's football would simply 'earn money' rather than promote and advance the sport as a whole. That was not to say, of course, that UEFA or FIFA were proposing to organise anything formal themselves; rather, a series of invitationals

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tournaments were set up, right up until 1991, when the first official Women's World Cup was held.

The last England international under the Women's FA's remit was in November 1992 against Italy as the FA finally started to take full control of women's football. It had taken the FA until 1983 to invite the Women's FA to affiliate to it and remain 'the sole governing body for women's football', but in the decade since then it had become increasingly clear that better processes were needed to give England a chance of success on the global stage – they had failed to qualify for the inaugural Women's World Cup, after all. More than that, though, the WFA was staffed by volunteers, who had their day jobs to fit in as well, and despite commitment to the cause and swathes of good intentions, that did not necessarily mean they were good at their roles in football administration.

The FA appointed Ted Copeland, the assistant regional director of coaching for the north-east, as the new manager of the England women's team, but the players themselves remained amateur, often ending up financially worse off after a match or a training camp with only a maximum of £15 a day in expenses on offer. Hope Powell was appointed in 1998, and radically restructured and revitalised women's football across all age groups with her overarching remit.

England hosted the 2005 European Championships, an opportunity to demonstrate the development of women's football under the FA's control. Yet the tournament received relatively little media coverage and the chance to bring the game to the mainstream and popularise it as a spectator sport, as well as create a legacy for participation, was lost.

A new strategy for women's football was needed. The decades of amateurism across the game were at an end. In 2011 the FA Women's Super League (WSL) was launched, with eight elite teams competing, and with four players in each of those squads receiving a maximum annual salary of £20,000, increased to £26,000 the year after. There were

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also central contracts on offer for England players, meaning the success of the domestic league was directly linked to the success of the national team from the start.

There were some features of the WSL that were confusing to onlookers. First, there was the application system – to take part, clubs had to formally apply for a licence, and initially there was no promotion or relegation, just a closed competition. After the first four years, a second division was created, and all the clubs applied once more – with Doncaster Belles, a solid mid-table team, bumped down to the new WSL2, and Manchester City, brand new but with vast money behind them, parachuted into WSL1. Second, there was the scheduling; it was intended to run over the summer months, to avoid clashes with the men’s professional leagues, and built in a sizeable gap so as to allow for global competitions such as the Olympics, the European Championships and the Women’s World Cup.

More than that, though, it ran at a different time of the year to the rest of the women’s football pyramid. The Women’s Premier League (WPL), organised in regional divisions and long the top division of elite women’s football, had been superseded by the WSL, and maintained its normal August to May season; after all, with no promotion or relegation between the best and the rest, there was no need to alter it.

However, in 2015 the first WPL club was promoted to WSL2 after Northern WPL champions Sheffield Ladies and Southern WPL champions Portsmouth Ladies fought it out in a one-off play-off for the big time. With the possibility of the WSL and WPL properly linking up in the future, with promotion and relegation as a matter of course, the problem of the fixture scheduling remained high on the agenda for fans, players and administrators.



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This is not a fully comprehensive chronicle of everything that has happened in women's football in the months since the Women's World Cup and the subsequent FA Cup Final. Rather, it is a glimpse into the lives of women's football clubs, players and administrators around the country, at all levels – a series of snapshots coming together to create a broader picture of the achievements of the game as well as the obstacles it still faces.

Autumn 2015

E NGLAND had played their last match in Canada on Saturday 4 July, flying back into London Heathrow on the Monday morning.

Five days later, domestic fixtures resumed in the Women's Super League, which had taken a break while the World Cup was on. Not all of the England players immediately returned to play but they did make appearances prior to their teams' matches, collecting bouquets, waving to the crowd, signing autographs and posing for photos. The accessibility and the down-to-earth presentation of the very best female footballers in the world have long been the most marketable qualities of the women's game; you're never going to get anywhere near the likes of Lionel Messi or Cristiano Ronaldo, or Harry Kane or John Terry, but Marta and Abby Wambach, Fran Kirby and Steph Houghton will always be happy to stop and have a chat with fans.

Some players came back from Canada with a slight knock, others were understandably tired after the rigours of tournament football and the emotional rollercoaster of the last-minute semi-final loss against Japan followed by the stunning win against Germany to secure a bronze medal. It was understandable that some observers wondered quite why the WSL began again so soon after the scheduled end of the tournament – weren't the powers-that-be expecting

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England to get through to the final weekend in Canada? – but it had been set out on the calendar for months, and meant that clubs could quickly capitalise on the lure of the Lionesses to advertise their forthcoming matches. That only applied to WSL1, though; the second tier of WSL competition lost their only Lioness when Reading's Fran Kirby signed for Chelsea, generating a record transfer fee for English women's football at the same time.

So WSL1 benefited hugely from a post-World Cup attendance bounce. Manchester City secured a new home ground record when they attracted 2,102 fans to the Academy Stadium for their first game back after the summer break, beating Birmingham City 1-0 thanks to a goal from England's Toni Duggan (Arsenal had attracted over 5,000 fans to the Emirates Stadium in 2012 for a WSL match against Chelsea but that was a one-off special event).

'It wasn't full,' said Lucy Bronze, Duggan's club and international team-mate, immediately after the game, 'but it was fuller than we've had it. Maybe in a few seasons we'll start selling the place out.'

Bronze was certainly correct to view the work to grow WSL attendances as a long-term project. Each season so far – since the foundation of the league in 2011 – has seen a substantial growth in regular fans. Overall, WSL1 clubs experienced a 48 per cent increase in attendances for the 2015 season; the FA's figures indicated that the average match attracted 1,076 compared to 728 in 2014.

Gavin Makel, head of women's football at Manchester City, was thoughtful about the impact of the Women's World Cup, observing then that there wasn't the same kind of tribalism as was found in the men's game; fans of women's football were happy to watch any team rather than obsessing over one particular club.

'Women's football is more like how men's football used to be – you can get close to the players, get a photograph and

an autograph, there's a nice atmosphere. People see it as a genuine sport,' he said in the summer of 2015.

Yet WSL2 clubs didn't have quite the same boost; they didn't get the same media coverage and they'd lost their only big name.

'We do as much as we can to raise the profile of WSL2, but naturally the broadcasters want to focus on WSL1,' admitted the FA's Katie Brazier.

'It just doesn't have the visibility of WSL1, and that's a shame,' said one fan of a WSL2 club, 'because if people in towns like Oxford, Durham, Reading and Watford were more aware of the fact that they have local clubs in the WSL structure, they'd be more likely to go along and watch them – especially with the post-World Cup publicity for the women's game generally. It feels like a struggle for WSL2 clubs to publicise themselves as being part of the WSL structure and it would help if the media just paid a bit more attention.'

Some fans of WSL2 clubs have wondered if they would have been better off staying in the Women's Premier League, a competition which runs through the winter – parallel with the men's leagues – and the gulf between the best and the rest is, perhaps, not quite so apparent.

'The [WSL2] sides who have previously played in the top division are very much better than most of the others,' says one Oxford fan. 'Their technique is better, their fitness is better, and they have strength in depth. Teams like Oxford are really enjoyable to watch – especially when they are showing a noticeable improvement from last season – but they struggle to field 11 players of real quality every week. Sides like Doncaster always look accomplished – and when WSL2 sides play WSL1 teams in the Continental Cup, the difference is even more marked.'

The Continental Cup is organised on a regional basis, and at this point it saw WSL1 and WSL2 clubs playing against each other in a mini-league format before progressing to the

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knockout stages. The FA is keen to point out the advantages of this – and again the rise in numbers going to watch these matches.

‘The average attendance for the first round of those fixtures was 74 per cent up on last season,’ says Brazier. What she did not add was the chasm in standards on show between the two top tiers of domestic football. WSL1’s Arsenal beat WSL2’s Watford 3-0 a fortnight after the end of the World Cup. Six days later, WSL1’s Manchester City beat WSL2’s Durham 5-0, and on the same night WSL1’s Sunderland beat WSL2’s Everton 5-2.

There were also some entertaining all-WSL1 games, of course, which flew in the face of recent form. Group One’s London rivals Chelsea and Arsenal duked it out at Wheatsheaf Park, Staines, in mid-August; though the FA Women’s Cup winners were also at the top of WSL1, and former megapowers the Gunners had struggled in the league, it was the visitors who dominated the game, ending up 2-0 winners.

Chelsea winger Gemma Davison couldn’t play against her former club as she was serving a one-match suspension after receiving a red card for a second bookable offence against Birmingham City the week before. Throughout the first half, fans in the main stand would have seen her stalking up and down the steps and rows; those a little closer to her would have heard her muttering, ‘I can’t watch this, I need to play.’

Chelsea certainly felt her absence. Despite her sparkling displays, she had not made the cut for the England World Cup squad; that seemed to give her an increased impetus to improve her performances even more. The cup winners also noticed the loss of Katie Chapman during the first half, injuring herself in a challenge and departing the ground on crutches.

Arsenal, however, did not subsequently have an easy route through the competition despite beating the league leaders. Their quarter-final match ended up being delayed

for a fortnight while the FA investigated the possibility that opponents Manchester City had fielded an ineligible player in an earlier round. In what was possibly one of the most opaque and confusing FA decisions in WSL history, it ended up deciding that the charge had not been proven – although the FA did not have the correct paperwork filed in its office, City had shown e-mails that indicated that the right forms had indeed been received by the governing body.

The match was quickly arranged for a Thursday evening at Arsenal's home ground in Borehamwood, causing City manager Nick Cushing to bluster that it was impossible to prepare a team to win at such short notice, perhaps failing to acknowledge that Pedro Martinez Losa, the Gunners' manager, was in exactly the same situation. City were defending a trophy they had won during the previous season but they could not get past Arsenal, who edged through with a single goal from Spanish striker Natalia. They continued their progress with a thumping 3-1 semi-final win over Birmingham City and made their fifth Continental Cup final in a row, winning it at Rotherham thanks to two goals from Jordan Nobbs plus one from American striker Chioma Ubogagu.

Manchester City still had a chance to pip Chelsea to the WSL1 title, though. They needed Sunderland to do them a favour – always a dangerous tactic – and take some points off Chelsea, who had a two-point cushion over second-placed City going into the final day.

It was always a long shot and Emma Hayes's team finished their season in impressive style, securing their league and cup double with a crushing 4-0 win over Sunderland. Even though Manchester City also won, beating Notts County 2-1, it was never going to be enough. City could console themselves with another broken record, however – this time attracting a new club high of 3,180 through the Academy Stadium turnstiles to see that last match of the season.

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WSL2 also went down to the wire, with Reading pipping Doncaster Belles to the title on goal difference two weeks after the top flight drew to a close.

As the champagne corks popped for some and the regrouping and reassessment began elsewhere, though, the rest of the women's football pyramid was just beginning in earnest.

Apart from the two WSL divisions and their Continental Cup tournament, all of the other women's football competitions in England run on a winter calendar, the same as the men's leagues, and the same as the European club competitions. They begin in August, run through the winter, and end in the spring; that includes the FA Women's Cup, which the WSL clubs enter in a later round, after the New Year.

Now that the WSL is firmly established, there is promotion and relegation between the two divisions – but there is also promotion between WSL2 and the Women's Premier League ...there is also promotion from the Women's Premier League to WSL2. At least, that is the theory. Because of the way the WSL operates – clubs apply to take part, providing extensive business and marketing plans as supporting evidence, and are awarded time-limited licences to compete in the league – its long-term development and progress is currently rather unclear, at least to those from the outside, and so is the future of clubs outside the top flights. When a club secures promotion on the field, it must then meet some tough off-the-pitch requirements to prove it has a suitable set-up to take part in the new, more elite competition.

While the WSL's strategy for future expansion involves a club development fund for its members, those at Premier League level and below don't have access to the same resources. Concentrating on how the WSL elite will capitalise on England's World Cup success may pay off but it may also be rather short-sighted. It's clear that already the WSL has seen a

boost in attendances, and with sensible planning those gates will grow; an elite proportion of their players are instantly recognisable media figures; the improved competition at the top of the game has made for a much better spectacle; and the improved club structures and facilities have combined to stop the talent drain seen so often a decade ago as young women opted to study overseas – usually in the USA – on a soccer scholarship, enabling them to play and gain a degree. The future of the Women's Super League – assuming all clubs turn fully professional much sooner rather than later – is reasonably bright.

Further down the pyramid, there are many more questions to be answered. If women's clubs are expected to have a formal tie with men's clubs, which is what seems to be transpiring, this could cause problems further down the line; just look at the number of once-giants who had funding pulled by their partner club when the men had a bad season, such as Charlton's legendary side. Premier League clubs looking for promotion to the big time have to manage their winter schedule, invest in their set-up, and prepare their facilities and the players for a summer league without the same kind of support as the WSL clubs receive. Women's football in England has a storied history; but the FA's governance of it started only two decades ago. Before that (and even after that), women's football was resolutely amateur; full professionalisation at the elite level, and preparing to extend that professionalisation downwards, is a slow process.