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FOOTBALL AND THE WOMEN'S WORLD CUP

Organisation, Media and Fandom

Carrie Dunn





Football and the Women's World Cup

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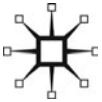
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▶ **Football and the
Women's World
Cup: Organisation,
Media and Fandom**

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FOOTBALL AND THE WOMEN'S WORLD CUP

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To my parents – who, unlike some of those surveyed in the FA's research quoted here, would never have dreamed of telling me that football wasn't an appropriate hobby for a girl

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1

Introduction: The Women's World Cup

Abstract: This chapter sets the context for the 2015 Women's World Cup and highlights the historical lack of research into women's sport and women's football in particular, especially after the 1980s boom in scholarship into the men's game. It also provides some context for my interest in this tournament, and my professional background in sports journalism and sports academia.

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The neglect of women's sport in society and in academic research

Researchers, feminists and feminist researchers have often failed to focus on women's sport. Hollis Elkins observed that women have been historically barred from competing, had their sexuality and appearance insulted or permitted only to play a modified version of the "real" (read: men's) game (1978: 22).

All these factors apply to women's football. In England, the ban on women playing football on FA-affiliated pitches came into play in 1921, and stood for half a century. Even after it was lifted, the FA were still hesitant to take on the governance of the women's game. While the Women's FA ran the game, a separate but affiliated body, a representative England team participated in some international tournaments, but with the rules modified – for example, two halves of 40 minutes were played in the *Mundialito*, contested during the 1980s.¹ There has also been a constant questioning of female footballers' femininity and sexuality, creating a tension for governing bodies who want to present the game for mainstream consumption but fear anything perceived to be outside the "norm".

Even more sidelined have been the fans of women's sport and their experiences. Sports fandom has carved out an academic niche over the past three decades, but this has focused mostly on male fans of men's sport. This is particularly the case in the United Kingdom when "sports fandom" and "football fandom" have been practically interchangeable.

These themes will be interrogated during this book as I explore the facets of the 2015 Women's World Cup.

Why the Women's World Cup 2015?

Women's football is the fastest growing participation sport in the United Kingdom and across the world. This book focuses on the England team and England fans at the 2015 Women's World Cup in Canada, where I conducted original research on fans of international women's football and public reaction to the tournament.

I was in a highly privileged position when I travelled to Canada and as I continue to research women's football, because by profession I am a sports journalist. Women's international football tournaments on

another continent have historically been extremely unlikely to be covered in great depth by the British media; there were a handful of British journalists following the England team in Canada in the group round and early knock-out stages, although perhaps unsurprisingly as soon as they progressed to the semi-final some more journalists flew out.

This was the second Women's World Cup I had travelled to, following 2011's tournament in Germany. There had been a certain buzz around the England squad, under the relatively new management of Mark Sampson following the departure of Hope Powell, who had shaped the national team's set-up over the previous decade. Towards the end of the group stages, I was a guest on a Radio 5 Live programme with a panel of journalists who specialised in women's football; 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. The British coverage of the tournament expanded as the squad progressed, as did the audience back at home.

There is plenty to analyse when it comes to the future of women's football in England – but my main focus of research while I was in Canada was the experience of the fans who were following the tournament. I spoke mostly to those who had travelled to watch England, but also to those supporting other countries. I wanted to know how and why they had become interested in women's football, which continues to take a back seat when it comes to finance and to media coverage; I wanted to know why they had chosen to travel to Canada rather than watch the matches at home; and I wanted to know how they felt about their experience of the tournament.

I was also interested in those people who were fans of women's football but had not travelled to Canada – was it simply a financially based decision, or were other factors in play that prevented them from that demonstration of commitment to the game and the team?

So I began my research with a short online survey, open to all fans. I asked respondents to indicate which geographical area of the world they lived in, relating it to the FIFA confederation zone that governed it, and the national team they supported, before going on to ask them about their attendance at 2015's World Cup as well as previous international tournaments. Those respondents who were travelling to the 2015 Women's World Cup and were willing to be interviewed either in person or via video chat were contacted and suitable appointments were made.

This book draws on the data I gathered during the Women's World Cup, offering some ideas and theories around how fans are drawn to women's football. I also highlight some problems in women's football identified by fans, and the ways they suggest they can be combatted. England and their fans are my focus; but there is some data offering significant and interesting comparisons with other countries around the world.

I begin, though, by setting the 2015 Women's World Cup in context; by looking briefly at the history of women's international football; by analysing the recent changes to the structure of elite women's football in England. I move on to look at the existent research on football fans before focusing on the new and original data I have gained about the fans of women's international football.

Note

- 1 Indeed, this reduced number of minutes was also introduced for the initial Olympic competitions (Williams 2003: 126). Williams (2007: 25) also reports that even after the first Women's World Cup (or Women's World Championship as it was referred to at the time) there was a certain amount of concern from some executives and governing bodies that women should not be playing matches of 90 minutes nor should they be playing with a Size 5 ball.

2

The History of Women's Football

Abstract: This chapter summarises the academic research that precedes this piece of work, focusing primarily on providing a brief history of international competitions in organised women's football. It draws on the work of the likes of Jean Williams to set the Women's World Cup 2015 in its historical context, exploring how the tournament has grown since its relatively recent inception.

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Reviewing the literature: women's football in England

In the second half of the 20th century, there was a veritable boom in football scholarship in England. However, this work focused on men's football and practices of male football fandom, usually violent or other criminal, deviant behaviours. The correlation between working-class men/masculinity and the violence to be found at football grounds was interrogated by several studies from the early 1970s onwards, creating a vast and dominant body of football-focused literature in which female fandom, involvement and experience continued to be pushed aside.

The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies' (CCCS) Clarke (1978) and Critcher (1979, 1991) both argued that the core values of working-class culture had traditionally been equated with masculinity, aggression, physical emphasis and regional identity, all of which were found within men's football. Critcher argued that the increased importance placed on spectacle and entertainment led to "traditional" (i.e., male and working-class) supporters' disaffection from the game, which in turn led to ritualised and realised aggression. Marsh et al. (1978; also Marsh, 1978) argued that football grounds staging men's football are the sites of rituals that demonstrate the fans' masculinity (1978: 133); they said that "hooliganism" was misunderstood and misinterpreted, actual violence was rare, and it was "running" (gangs of fans running towards opposition team's fans with the intent of making them retreat) that was most often seen at grounds. For them, this was not a genuine attempt to fight; rather, in the supposed absence of females to impress, it was a stage to demonstrate physical presence and overpowering masculinity (the "ritualised violence" referred to by Critcher).

Similarly, popular anthropologist Desmond Morris (1981) set out to assess "the soccer tribe", which he described as "strange and often savage" (1981: 8), making it clear that his research, intended to be "anthropological" and looking at the football fan as a species of animal, was set within this same "law and order" context. He described the game itself as a "ritual hunt" (1981: 15), and as a "battle" (1981: 17), discussing the "aggressive feelings" that emerge and are expressed at men's football (1981: 19), and once again describing the football supporter solely as male. Evidence in support of these authors' arguments is based purely on observation and assumption, without data to back up the conclusions; the heavily gendered arguments show the authors' belief in a possible "biological" explanation for all "disorderly" behaviour – men cannot curb their "naturally" aggressive instincts.

Women are omitted from any examination; their fandom is invisible, for if their presence were acknowledged, these “natural” hypotheses would be proved utterly unfounded.

Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, the “Leicester School” of football research criticised earlier concepts of football disorder, particularly the idea put forward by the CCCS and Ian Taylor that it was a feeling of social exclusion from (men’s) football that made male working-class fans behave in a violent fashion. Their concern was to investigate the so-called subculture of football hooliganism, taking the figurational standpoint that the process of civilisation is ongoing, and currently a de-civilising spurt was affecting the lower working classes, resulting in uncivilised, that is, violent, behaviour (cf. Dunning et al., 1982; Elias and Dunning, 1986; Williams, 1984; Williams et al., 1984), and carried out this research through participant observation and then undercover observation. This period of work continued to largely omit discussion of gender issues involving female fans. The assumption here was that the most significant aspect of football support and thus the focus for study was the opportunity for hooliganism – a phenomenon in which women do not take part, and could therefore be excluded from consideration. They did, however, discuss women’s role in socialisation, arguing that because men have historically been the physical protectors of their family group, they have learnt to be more aggressive (Williams, Dunning and Murphy, 1984: 193); and from childhood, working-class boys and girls are segregated, with girls encouraged to take up domestic responsibilities, leaving the boys in tight-knit gangs which draw attention from the police and from “rival gangs” in the area (1984: 202).

Yet the popular media and academic perception of fans started to alter as they began to take a visible role in the debates over the changes in the game, and collective action came increasingly to the fore; although the football fan was still characterised as male, the traditional view that he was also invariably working class and violent started to subside after the stadium disasters of the 1980s (Heysel, Bradford and Hillsborough). Despite these developments, it took another decade until research into the female fans of men’s football began to take shape (see Pope, 2010 and Dunn, 2014).

Just as female fans have been ignored, there has also been a tradition of women’s football in England being equally invisibilised, most obviously in studies and media which purport to present a full history of the game. Of course, what they mean is that they are presenting a history

of the men's game. Women's involvement in football has been sidelined away from the "malestream" (Dunn, 2014: 2); it is treated as lesser, as abnormal, and as unworthy of attention.

A few scholars have attempted to rectify this absence and shown quite clearly that, as Bell says, from the 19th century women's football mirrored the rise of the men's game (indeed, Williams suggests that the first international women's football match took place as early as 1881 – see Williams, 2013: 17). Interestingly, though, Bell also argues that women's football in England has always been more about the experience of playing than spectatorship, and that historically the game did not seek a mass audience; only once the more commercially minded FA took control of the game did this become an issue (2012: 351).

However, this does not mean that women's football has not attracted large crowds. From the very start of organised men's football, women's football operated parallel but often entirely separately; Lopez (1997) recounts a letter sent by the FA to member clubs in 1902, warning them not to play against "ladies' teams". Dick, Kerr's Ladies are perhaps the most famous women's team of the early 20th century, playing scores of matches around the time of the First World War, ostensibly to raise money for charity. They have been characterised as a "factory team" in the mythology of women's football, but as various researchers have pointed out, not all of their players actually worked there (see Williams, 2013: 15). Lopez concludes that Dick, Kerr's Ladies were careful not to present themselves as taking the game too seriously; despite playing some mixed matches, they also played some in novelty costumes, emphasising that their primary reason for participation was simply having fun (1997: 4). Yet as these women were often playing two or more games in a week – alongside their full-time jobs in the factory – it is difficult to really believe that they did not take football seriously. Indeed, the success of the Dick, Kerr's Ladies was one of the key factors leading to the formation of the English Ladies' FA in December 1921 (Lopez, 1997: 7). Coinciding with the FA's ban on women's football on affiliated pitches, after this schism, men were banned by the FA for their involvement in the women's game.

As Lopez (1997: 4) observes, Dick, Kerr's Ladies were effectively a representative England team as they toured the world, sporting a Union Flag image on their kit. Williams (2003: 49) expands on this, pointing out that international competition has always been part of the women's game, with teams representing the home nations playing each other, and clubs such as Dick, Kerr's Ladies travelling abroad for matches.

The 1966 men's World Cup, hosted in and won by England, boosted participation and spectatorship for the women's game as well (Lopez, 1997: 22), although Williams (2003: 38) adds the caveat that it was not a turning point per se as the popularity of and participation in women's football grew both before and after that year.

In November 1969, Harry Batt, the manager of women's team Chiltern Valley, was invited by the Federation of Independent European Female Football (broadly the women's equivalent of an independent UEFA) to take an England team to a tournament to be hosted in Turin, where they would compete against Italy, Denmark and France (1996: 42). Batt selected primarily his own players, with a scattering of representation from the Southampton team, but ignored anyone with an affiliation to the other two most successful clubs of the time, Fodens and Corinthians. Later, Batt selected a team of "English Independents" to represent the country at the 1971 Mexico World Cup organised by FIEFF, which garnered him a life ban from the game and brought fines and suspensions down on the players involved (Lopez, 1997: 61).¹

The Women's FA was formed in 1970 and one of their primary objectives was to establish an official England team as opposed to this illicit team selected by Batt (Lopez, 1997: 45; Williams, 2007: 10). Players were prohibited from playing abroad through threats that were they to be paid for playing, they would be compromising their amateur status and no longer eligible for selection for England.² Bell stops short of welcoming this time of detachment, but recognises women's football in England during this time as a space in which women were independent, playing football without the FA's express and explicit permission and largely being governed by women (2012: 351).

There were independent proposals for a Women's World Cup to be held in England in 1972 or 1973, which gained support from England's men's World Cup winners Bobby Moore, Geoff Hurst and Martin Peters; Sue Lopez, one of the best female players in England at the time, was approached to become involved (Lopez, 1997: 62). However, she reports that the Women's FA were nervous about their lack of control over the tournament, and FIEFF eventually intervened; Williams (2007: 141) has since uncovered correspondence which elaborates that FIFA and UEFA had been approached and asked to support the concept of a Women's World Cup, but they dismissed the proposal and the previous tournaments which, they said, were organised only to "earn money" rather than promote the sport.³ Ted Hart, a journalist who had contacted Lopez

to scout out her interest, wrote a scathing letter suggesting that this tournament would have been a chance to convince “the television millions” of the quality of women’s football. Interestingly, he also suggested the formation of a “super league” from which a representative England team could be selected for future tournaments of this nature. Obviously, this did not happen.

The Women’s FA were poor at organising international matches and travel, although strategically they were keen to improve the standards and frequency of domestic and international competition (Williams, 2003: 85); they established an “international team committee” in 1972, although there were no immediate plans for UEFA to organise competitive matches.⁴ Despite this, in the mid-1980s the England team they selected was relatively successful at the so-called *Mundialito* – the “Little World Cup” – perhaps indicative of how lightly women’s football was regarded, or perhaps simply a reflection of the reduced size matches that were played, only 40 minutes each way (Lopez, 1997: 65).

The Women’s FA were also poor at organising their funds and resources; it took until 1987 for a representative England Under-21 team to be established, and it later folded due to lack of funds. Senior team manager Barrie Williams resigned due to a lack of resources and the WFA’s failure to respond to ideas about development (Lopez, 1997: 68). Sue Lopez took on the role of WFA international officer in 1991, and she recounts several of the problems she faced; the squad receiving drill suits in the wrong sizes might seem a minor issue but it was reflective of the lack of organisation and amateurism within the WFA.

The last England international under the Women’s FA’s remit was in November 1992 against Italy. The first half of 1993 signalled women’s football in England transition from the Women’s FA to FA control. In 1983, following a directive from FIFA, the FA had finally invited the Women’s FA to affiliate to them, just as the county FAs did (Lopez, 1997: 68); and it became increasingly evident that women’s football needed a more professional approach if it was to develop. England’s failure to qualify for the first official FIFA Women’s World Cup⁵ in 1991 was indicative of this; Lopez argues that it reflected the “gulf” between British teams (club and the Home Nations representative teams) and the best in the world (1997: 104).

The FA appointed Ted Copeland, the assistant regional director of coaching for the northeast, as the new manager of the England women’s team. Lopez recalls that by 1995 the England team received 15 shirts

each (with their names) for the Women's World Cup, and even had their boots provided (1997: 92). Williams (2003: 110), however, reports that the Copeland regime was unpopular with players, who were infantilised by the strict regime and timetable, and who more often than not ended up out of pocket after their international matches and week-long training camps as they received no payment and only a maximum of £15 a day as expenses. Hope Powell's appointment in 1998, according to Williams, created a much better atmosphere within the players' camp, with the new manager allowing them much more freedom.

England were the hosts for the 2005 European Championships, which Bell defines as a "significant moment" for the game, a potential critical event that could mark a sea change for the sport. As she points out, though, this major event was simply not capitalised upon; although the FA and the tournament organisers spoke about the potential "legacy" on offer, no research was commissioned to chronicle the long-term impact of the tournament; it was simply categorised as "successful" with some data gained from organisers and participants and left at that (2012: 350).

It was after this that the FA's new strategies for women's football, and more specifically elite women's football, began to take more coherent shape. Bell argues that the majority of female footballers in England have been "genuinely amateur" in contrast to the many thousands of male professionals, and thus they remain underrepresented in the game's governance (2012: 351). It is poignant to read then-England international Debbie Bampton's words in Sue Lopez's account of women's football in which she dreams of a future where female players are semi-professional and do not suffer financially for their footballing careers (1997: 107). As Williams correctly observes, there may be a handful of international superstars who make a good living from the game and gain a certain amount of celebrity, but for each of them there are thousands more for whom playing football has cost much more than they have ever been able to earn (2013: 46).

Now, however, women's football in England is increasingly fully professional; with England players receiving central contracts alongside their WSL club contracts, the success and professionalism of the national team is inextricably bound up with the success and professionalism of each of the club sides. Williams reports that initially there were 20 central contracts on offer paying £16,000 annually, offering players the "freedom to train" rather than giving them fully professional facilities to work in. After the establishment of the Women's Super League, the

regulations stated that four players in each club squad could receive the maximum annual salary of £20,000, which was increased to £26,000 in 2012 (Williams, 2013: 81). Yet as Kjaer and Agergaard observe, once this process of professionalisation begins, the game fundamentally changes; they refer to Dunning's thoughts on this, suggesting that once the amateur ethos is eroded it is replaced by "something else", which is not necessarily predictable or immediately definable (2013: 819). (It is worth mentioning here that it is not only the England women who scrape together a relatively mediocre salary for playing football professionally; the American and Australian players have also spoken publicly about this.⁶ Indeed, one player went on the record about her club placing her with a host family so she did not have to pay rent on an apartment and thus drain her small salary further.⁷)

With the WSL still in its relative infancy, only tentative conclusions can really be drawn. Having an elite league that is effectively fully professional is a forward step; but in a previous work with Jo Welford we have argued that the WSL is currently, in effect, still an outsider in terms of English football (2014: 90), operating on a relative shoestring despite the fortunes of the sport, forming the leagues via a licensing system of applications, and running throughout the summer, in contrast to the winter season that all other football competitions use. We suggest that women's football in England now, after some financial investment and the FA's support, operates as an "outsider on the inside"; it is both "football" as the public knows it and something different, and it continues to struggle to carve out its own place in public space and consciousness (2015: 92). We also warn that simply adding women to a competition or a sport does not make it necessarily inclusive or equitable, and suggest that as the traditional male structures of football have sidelined and invisibilised women previously, a truly inclusive, welcoming game for women is not necessarily going to be created by allowing them, bit by bit, into that setup which ostracised them for so many years.

Women's football and global competition

International women's football competition endorsed by UEFA and FIFA has been a relatively recent development. Williams observes that FIFA were established in 1904 and had no involvement whatsoever with women's football, a fact reiterated by their 1951 correspondence with

T. Cranshaw of the Nicaragua FA, who had raised a concern about women playing the game entirely unsanctioned; he had seen women playing football in Costa Rica and knew of tens of thousands of women in the United States who were also playing the game. FIFA simply responded that as they had no jurisdiction (or interest) in women's football they would be doing nothing about it (2013: 5).

Yet within two decades both FIFA and UEFA began to issue edicts to its member organisations, suggesting they take control of women's football as soon as possible. The FIEFF tournaments, as discussed in the previous chapter, were attracting crowds of over 10,000, and UEFA began to worry about losing control of this obviously extremely popular form of football competition, despite their efforts to stay as far removed from it as possible in the preceding decades. FIFA members were instructed in 1970 that they should take control of the women's game amidst fears that external organisations and people were profiting financially from it (Williams, 2013: 27). Yet the resultant actions were not immediate. In 1971, UEFA's member organisations voted 39–1 in favour of national associations taking control of the women's game, with Scotland the sole association voting against (Lopez, 1997: 59). The increase in participant numbers and the commercial interest in the game finally forced UEFA and FIFA members to take action whether they liked it or not (Williams, 2013: 24). Indeed, Williams offers a more sceptical reading of UEFA and FIFA's decision making through this time; she suggests that taking control of the women's game and establishing competition occurred at a time when the men's game was moving further away from the iron grip of the governing bodies, and that they were seeking an additional product to be marketed (2013: 74).

Williams (2003: 113) notes that the Asian Cup was established in 1975, with an Oceania equivalent following in 1983. World tournaments were finally established in the late 1980s following a series of "world invitationals"; China hosted an unofficial women's World Cup in 1988 as well as the first official tournament in 1991 (Lopez, 1997: 195); and it was not until 1996 that women's football was adopted as an Olympic sport (Williams, 2013: 12).⁸

Women's football, of course, has a higher status in other countries, most notably those where it has been a professional career option for decades; Lopez argues that Italy, Denmark, Sweden then Norway were the pioneers of women's football, followed by Germany and the United States, who worked hard to catch up (1997: 111). She also gives a special

mention to Japan, who set up their fully professional women's league in 1992. Lopez's work also discusses her own career in the 1970s, when she moved to Italy to pursue football as a profession while it was still firmly amateur in England. Williams (2013) observes valuably that female athletes have sought commercial gain over many years, and that sport's commercialisation is not a recent development, but began in the 19th century. Of course the impact of migration is always a hot topic both in sport and in politics – the FA in England have always talked at length about their efforts to improve the men's national team by increasing the number of homegrown players in the domestic leagues and limiting the number of imports; but Williams draws attention to the often overlooked migration of female players. As Lopez's experience attests, as well-organised, well-funded, well-supported women's leagues have been established around the world, so too elite players have cast their eyes around to pursue chances to improve their skills, compete at the highest possible level and make a living where possible.

Throughout, Williams argues convincingly that there has been a separation across Europe to a greater or lesser degree between "football" (the "normal", "usual" men's competitions) and "women's football", which has been neglected by football authorities, media and academic study alike; this aligns well with the earlier argument (Dunn and Welford, 2014) that women's football remains an outsider even when it has been brought within the governing bodies' auspices. She presents case studies focusing on individual women's careers domestically and overseas; historically, female players have had to balance football with another job, usually an ancillary one within the sport, to cover their bills. More than that, as she observes, the elite female footballer has an additional burden: she does not have a sole responsibility for and to herself, but is expected to also take on the role of making the whole sport a viable commercial product, attractive to fans, media and sponsors. This is certainly the case across the world (and this media profile will be discussed shortly).

She concludes by reporting one of the few consensus established in her fieldwork – that the profile of women's football across the world needs to be raised. For the time being, the agreement seems to be that the best tool to do this is through the elite players themselves, maintaining that additional burden that their male equivalents simply do not have – they will continue to be positioned as role models and perceived and presented as approachable, modest, accessible, grateful, humble, passionate, community-spirited and digitally aware. These are heavy

expectations for female players, but as I will highlight throughout the rest of this book, they are certainly being fulfilled to a greater or lesser extent as fans begin to feel real connections with the footballers they see on the field.

Notes

- 1 This may also have something to do with the way the tournament was presented. Grainey reports that it discredited the sport as a whole thanks to its sexism and showiness – including pink goalposts (2012: 157).
- 2 Sue Lopez herself spent time playing in Italy but eventually returned to England to pursue her international career. Williams (2003: 40) also mentions Rose Reilly and Edna Nellis, both Scottish players who had played professionally abroad and objected to the appointment of a poorly qualified male manager as national coach. They were both banned for life (although continued to work abroad).
- 3 As Williams points out, this is all rather ironic bearing in mind that the first Women's World Cup (Championship) was sponsored by the confectionery M&Ms.
- 4 Williams (2007: 20) lists a number of pan-European and global invitational tournaments that took place from the 1970s up until FIFA's first official Women's World Cup in 1991.
- 5 This first FIFA-endorsed world tournament was branded the Women's World Championship, and took on the World Cup mantle from 1995. For clarity I refer to the Women's World Cup from 1991 throughout.
- 6 The Australian national team, affectionately referred to as "the Matildas", effectively went on strike in the summer of 2015 after the Women's World Cup following a collective bargaining agreement dispute between the football authorities and the players' representatives. Male players were also involved in this dispute; the women garnered much of the attention as they withdrew from a training camp and a scheduled international tour.
- 7 http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/06/womens-soccer-is-a-feminist-issue/394865/?utm_source=SFTwitter
- 8 The Women's World Cup also acts as a qualifying route for the Olympic competition. England, however, does not have an Olympic football team for men or women because the Olympic team competes as Great Britain and Northern Ireland rather than the separate countries which have their own football associations.

3

Women's World Cup 2015 – Researching the Experience of Fans

► *Abstract: This chapter begins by discussing the background of events leading up to the Women's World Cup in Canada, and moves on to look at the experience of fans who travelled to watch matches during the tournament. It is based on my material gathered before and during the tournament, and begins by looking at quantitative and qualitative data gathered through an online questionnaire, examining the reasons people decided to attend the Women's World Cup in person, and also the reasons some chose not to. It explores the attendees' overall feelings about the tournament and their experiences in Canada.*

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Introduction: the run-up to WWC 2015

Perhaps unsurprisingly, FIFA conducted a survey on women's football the year before the 2015 Women's World Cup, eliciting responses from 177 member associations and drawing the data together to some largely positive conclusions about the growth of the women's game, particularly in the countries where the governing bodies have genuinely embraced and invested in it. It also identified priorities for its member confederations over the course of the next decade, and very few highlighted the performance of the national team as a focus. Instead, they wanted to attract more people to the sport, from the grassroots upwards, and raise its profile (FIFA, 2014). The apparent invisibilising of the fact that high-profile, successful elite teams might achieve both these aims was not discussed.

Indeed, FIFA has a strange ambivalence to its leading female football practitioners. Much of the run-up to the Women's World Cup was overshadowed by the decision to play the tournament on artificial pitches rather than grass, and the threats of legal action from a group of high-profile players. They filed a lawsuit in October 2014 with the Ontario Human Rights Tribunal, claiming discrimination, with news agencies quoting Attorney Hampton Dellinger as saying: "The gifted athletes we represent are determined not to have the sport they love be belittled on their watch... Getting an equal playing field at the World Cup is a fight female players should not have to wage but one from which they do not shrink. In the end, we trust that fairness and equality will prevail over sexism and stubbornness" (Eurosport.com, 2014).

Tatjana Haenni, FIFA's head of women's competitions, however, dismissed the legal threats straight off, saying: "No plans to change that decision [to host the tournament on artificial pitches]. I can't answer if that is fair but that is the way it is going to be. It is according to the competition regulations, it is according to laws of the game so all matches will be on artificial turf." FIFA maintained this stance, forcing the players' collective hand; as the *Guardian* reported (2015), as time began to run out they needed to begin their tournament preparations and train on the appropriate surface. With no room for leeway, the matter was quietly dropped prior to the tournament, but continued to cause controversy throughout. Abby Wambach, one of the players who initially launched the lawsuit, blamed the surface for her miss against Sweden, saying afterwards: "I think I [would] score if we're on grass" (VICE, 2015); and

perhaps rather more seriously Australia's Michelle Heyman complained about the heat from the pitch, saying: "It's like walking on hot coals with your skin ripping and slowly cracking, constantly" (Associated Press, 2015).

It is possible that FIFA felt they could easily ignore the outcry from the female players simply because they had bigger problems during 2015. Law enforcement officials in the United States and in Switzerland announced investigations into various FIFA procedures and executives, meaning that the self-proclaimed "godfather of women's football", FIFA president Sepp Blatter, failed to travel to Canada for the Women's World Cup at all.

The fans of women's football

As already observed, there has been limited research done on female fans of men's football (see Pope, 2010; Dunn, 2014), but next to nothing currently exists on fans of women's football – the data gained at this tournament should prove to be an important intervention and one which highlights the need for further work in the area. This is particularly the case as fan studies continues to expand across fields of expertise. After decades of neglect, the experience of fans is finally a priority across cultural scholarship, exploring what attracts people to particular "fandoms" and what they gain from following that particular programme, text or team. Almost everyone has one chosen "fandom" which is special to them, and the move towards privileging individuals' experience is significant. In particular, this is a fascinating development within football studies – for years, fans were treated as a faceless mass, liable to violence and herded into stadia like animals, resulting in the disasters of the 1980s, perhaps most notoriously at Hillsborough.

Even though individual experiences are now being reported and listened to, the football fan is still assumed to be male; and football is still assumed to be a "man's game". This institutional sexism has been noted in the highest echelons; indeed, at the recent FSF Supporters' Summit, FA chairman Greg Dyke told attendees: "If you look at who's supporting, who's playing and then you look at the FA Council – it doesn't represent them. It's still overwhelmingly male, overwhelmingly white, in a world that isn't overwhelmingly male and white, and somehow that has to be

changed. We have to try and change it but we're not alone, supporters have got to try and change it as well."

As Dyke acknowledged (and as I noted in a previous work, Dunn, 2014: 109), football clubs and authorities in England are and have historically been failing in their efforts to promote the men's game to women as fans due to their lack of understanding of female fan experiences and practices. The sport is not and has not been marketed effectively to girls and women because institutionalised sexism remains pervasive within the sport; despite clubs and authorities paying lip service to the idea that football is for everyone, sexism is embedded in the sport and its structures, meaning that female fans continue to encounter offputting attitudes. The apparent anxiety to attract women, children and family groups to men's football is not due to a keenness to promote equality of opportunity, but simply a desire to maximise ticket revenues and merchandise spend. This is an area that requires much more investigation on a wider scale; however, my research leads me to conclude that if women are encouraged to go to men's football, whether that is through advertising, marketing or encouragement from individuals close to them, they will certainly attend. However, current attitudes mean that significant numbers of women are and could continue to be dissuaded from attendance or even interest. The same applies to football more broadly, as attendees or as participants. Indeed, research over the past three decades has begun to report on the diversity of football crowds (mostly looking at men's football; see Bromberger, 1995; Back et al., 2001; Caudwell, 2011; Dunn, 2014) and the different forms of sexism still present in the stadium and in the structures of the game as a whole, broadly preventing women's participation as players, fans and administrators. The exploration of the experience of (both male and female) fans of women's football is thus a new tangent for the field.

This provides the rationale for this study – the Women's World Cup occurs once every four years, so there are reasonably rare opportunities for researchers to investigate the experiences of fans at these events as they actually happen. My intent was first to gain broad data about fans of women's football who would be following the tournament either in person or via media coverage, looking at their reasons for travelling to Canada or choosing not to; and then to interrogate some respondents further depending on their answers, their proximity to me during the tournament and on their willingness to be interviewed. (This methodology was one I employed with success in a previous work, Dunn, 2014,

on female fans in men's professional football in England.) My focus was on England fans (and I travelled with the team and fans during the tournament, making it much more straightforward to set up in-person interviews with respondents) but I also spoke to fans of and in other countries, primarily those who followed the United States, Canada and Australia, for comparative purposes. As I have noted, I was in a privileged position in terms of access and a certain amount of social capital gained through my journalism; and just as in my previous work (Dunn, 2014) I gained the trust of respondents, obviously all fans of women's football, because they knew of my own interest in women's football, and that overlap in interest created a bond upon which the interview data were gathered.

Questionnaire data

Owing to my position as a sports journalist who covers women's football, I was fortunate that when I set up an online survey seeking fans of the game to answer a handful of questions, many people instantly responded, and then went on to share the questionnaire with their own networks. The questions asked and answer options provided were as follows:

Part 1

Where do you live? Please indicate the area in which you live based on FIFA's world zones: Europe; Asia; Africa; North and Central America and the Caribbean; South America; Oceania

Part 2

Have you been to any previous Women's World Cups?

Yes – Germany 2011

Yes – China 2007

Yes – United States 2003

Yes – United States 1999

Yes – Sweden 1995

Yes – China 1991

No

Part 3

Are you going to (will you be in) Canada to watch the Women's World Cup in summer 2015?

If you are going to Canada this year, are you going to follow any particular team? Please fill in the text box with the name of the team you will follow,

“None” if you are not going to follow a team; if you are going to work there, please note your job title.

If you are going to (if you will be in) Canada this year, which of the host cities will you be watching matches in?

Vancouver

Edmonton

Montreal

Winnipeg

Ottawa

Moncton

If you are going to (be in) Canada this year (for the World Cup), how long are you going for?

Please tick the nearest estimate: the whole tournament (four weeks); three weeks; two weeks; one week; less than a week

If you are NOT going to Canada this year, did you consider it?

If you did NOT consider going to Canada this year, why not?

Too expensive

Couldn't take holiday

Family commitments

The travel required is too extensive

Other (please respond with free text)

If you considered going to Canada this year and opted NOT to, why?

Too expensive

Couldn't take holiday

Family commitments

The travel required is too extensive

Other (please respond with free text).

Respondents were also provided with an additional free text box at the end of the questionnaire, and were asked to provide any other information about their support of women's football, specifically international competitions, that they thought may be relevant; and asked whether they would be prepared to talk about their fandom in more detail in a qualitative interview.

As can be seen from the questions asked, they were written in order to gain information not just about people who would be in attendance in Canada but about also those who would not be and would instead be following the tournament from home. It should be noted here that because of my own work and social networks, the majority of the questionnaire respondents were from Europe and North America, and only a very small proportion from the rest of the world; nevertheless, the data

elicited, if treated with the appropriate caution, still provides an insight into fan opinions and practices.

To summarise the data briefly, 256 respondents completed the questionnaire, and the geographical breakdown was as follows:

- Europe: 51 per cent
- North/Central America and the Caribbean: 36 per cent
- Asia: 7 per cent
- Oceania: 4 per cent
- Africa: 1 per cent
- South America: 1 per cent

Sixteen per cent of the total respondents had been to Women's World Cups previously. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the majority of these (52 per cent) were based in the North and Central America region, which hosted tournaments in 1999 and 2003; and 36 per cent of previous attendees were people from Europe who had attended the 2011 tournament in Germany.

In terms of attendees at the 2015 tournament, 32 per cent of total respondents went to matches in Canada. Of those attendees in Canada, 20 per cent were travelling from Europe, 15 per cent from Asia, 9 per cent from Oceania, a single fan from Africa and the remainder from North and Central America/the Caribbean.

Of those respondents who were not going to any match at the 2015 Women's World Cup, 48 per cent had considered going; and in another unsurprising finding, most of the European respondents who fell into that category and identified a single reason why they had ultimately decided not to go said it was because of the expense of travelling to Canada. However, respondents were also given space to add additional information to clarify their reasons for not attending, and some of these free text answers do seem to shed some light on some fascinating aspects of fans' relationship to the women's game.

For example, one fan reported that because their country did not qualify they would not be travelling to Canada. This seems entirely reasonable, and the loyalty to a team is of course replicated in men's football. Many respondents were clearly long-term fans of women's football but could not afford to travel to a tournament on a different continent, so they emphasised that they would have attended had it been closer. One respondent in Europe was typical, answering: "I have been to the European championships but going to a tournament outside your own continent is very expensive – I often plan my annual leave around

women's football." One in Oceania reported similarly and succinctly: "Would love to have gone but it's a long way from Australia."

There were also examples of fans wanting to follow their team but not wanting to visit the host cities or not being able to travel there easily; one England fan responded that they "didn't like the location of England's group draw", adding, "Moncton sucks". The puzzlement about the selection of Moncton – a small university town on the east coast – as a host city was echoed by other fans who expressed allegiance to England; one fan commented: "Moncton was a terrible place to host major games, lousy travel, next to no connections." This line of argument was repeated by some fans who would have preferred to see the games in bigger venues; one fan in North America responded: "Would have gone to WWC if there were games in Toronto."

In a similar vein, one fan in North America was unimpressed by the scheduling and the spread of host cities, saying: "Don't like teams being scattered across country even in group play. Canada is a huge country. Playing two games in Winnipeg then the third group game in Vancouver is nuts. Expensive enough to travel to one distant city for game but to two? Costly & time & \$\$\$ that should have been spent vacationing spent on travel."

There was a certain amount of wistfulness in many of the responses from the non-attending fans. One fan in North America reported: "I would love to see greater advertising of the World Cup and would love to be able to afford to see other women play some world-class sport."

One very significant element – and one to which this book will return later – was the lack of journalists travelling to Canada to cover the tournament. Several journalists and bloggers based in Europe completed the questionnaire and reported that they could not afford to go to the tournament in order to report on the games because the lack of demand from editors meant they would be unable to cover their costs. One professional reporter said:

I have watched England matches and one or two others on TV during previous World Cups and considered attending the one in China if I could have found a media organisation willing to use my (journalism) work. I was keen to attend this one, as I now have even more interest in the women's game – and I love Canada! But as a freelance journalist, I could not afford to go.

A blogger responded similarly:

My [intention] was to go to Vancouver for the Final but I'd be looking at close to 2000 euro for four days with flight, accommodation etc. I had media accreditation granted by FIFA and I am disappointed not to go. My day job

consists of working in IT but as a “hobby” I’m a women’s international football correspondent. I do not get paid for my football work and the money spent to go to Canada would equate to almost four European holidays. It wouldn’t make sense to travel there to blow hard-earned money when I can cover it from home. I was at the Algarve Cup this year which was classed as a mini-World Cup and my aim is to attend again in 2016.

Introduction to the qualitative data gained through interviewing

During the tournament, I conducted a series of in-depth qualitative interviews, either in person or via video call. The people I spoke to were either English, Canadian, American or Australian, and almost all have been present at the 2015 Women’s World Cup (one who was not present spoke about her experiences at earlier tournaments). This is, obviously, a reasonably small and self-selecting sample, but the richness of the data has given rise to some intriguing and significant themes, a selection of which I will discuss in detail through the rest of the book. An advantage of this self-selection meant that respondents were all extremely prepared to talk about their experiences as fans of women’s football, meaning that a significant amount of data were collected during these interviews.

As a precursor to these focused chapters, the next section provides some background on the respondents’ direct experiences of previous Women’s World Cups, whether in person or by following the tournaments via the media coverage. None had been to the first Women’s World Championship in China in 1991, but respondents had attended each of the following tournaments. This is merely for context; it is nowhere near a complete history of those preceding tournaments nor a full supporting history from those fans, simply an interesting backdrop to their experiences in 2015.

Experience of previous Women’s World Cups

1995 – Sweden

Williams (2003: 152) describes the 1995 tournament as a disappointing one; it found itself battling for coverage with the World Athletics Championships, with which it was sharing four venues. Although a relatively small proportion of respondents had been to Women’s World

Cups previously, most of those who had were American, benefiting from the two tournaments held there; but two respondents, Lisa and Ann, both US fans, had also travelled together to the tournaments held in Europe, beginning with the 1995 tournament in Sweden. Lisa recalled the welcome the visitors received in the host cities, saying:

Oh, it was absolutely thrilling, I loved it, the Swedish folks were really welcoming, we even got to have a soccer match especially set up for us on the tour, us against a local Swedish team, and they got the American flag flying and the Swedish flag flying, and they gave everybody kits for the day to wear, I think that was the most official soccer experience I've ever had from a European perspective.

1999, 2003 – United States

The 1999 Women's World Cup gave women's football one of its most iconic images – Brandi Chastain tearing off her shirt after winning the tournament for the United States. (The media's reaction to this incident will be discussed later.) It was an ambitious tournament in terms of its structure and the aims for breadth of global media coverage (Williams, 2003: 161), and motivated by the failure of Sweden's World Cup four years previously; Williams (2007: 2) describes it as the most high-profile women's sporting event ever, reaching a global audience beyond merely football fans.

It was also a watershed moment for the organisation of international women's football, with the coaches of the UEFA-affiliated participants holding a round-table discussion afterwards to discuss the development of the game in Europe but also herald a 'media breakthrough' during the tournament (Williams, 2013: 45). Hall also points to the excellent publicity and marketing around this World Cup, with all 32 games televised live and 90,000 attending the final (2003: 39).

The 2003 Women's World Cup was initially scheduled to be held in China, but was moved to the United States a few months prior to the start due to the outbreak of SARS. The intent was that the United States already had the facilities in place because they had hosted the previous tournament and had a fan-base in place; but respondents' memories indicated that it was a bit of a let-down after the excitement of 1999. Many of these interviewees were American, so whether or not this was because the United States did not defend their title or because the tournament could not be marketed properly is unclear.

Melissa's response was typical as she spoke about her recollection of her match attendance in 2003, saying:

I remember it was a double-header, I remember I was excited because I got to see the most of the players from the '99 team, I got to see Kristine Lilly play and I got to see Julie Foudy and Mia Hamm and all those people, of course I remember they went out and they lost in the semi-final so that was a bit disappointing after the big win in 1999. I just remember being pretty excited to go, although it was a bit of a comedown after all the full stadiums in 1999, it wasn't such a put-together-at-the-last-minute thing, in 2003, the big stadium down in this area, Gillette Stadium, wasn't really very full. I enjoyed watching it, anyway.

Melissa's emphasis on her excitement seeing the 1999 Women's World Cup winners is significant; she does not talk about them as part of the 2003 squad, which of course they were, but in terms of their previous achievement, which made the occasion special for her. She also notes the comparative small attendances, and refers to the Gillette Stadium, in Foxborough, Massachusetts, which now reports that its capacity for 'soccer' is around 20,000, although I have as yet been unable to confirm its capacity in 2003. (Some sources quote the 2003 capacity as 22,385, but this cannot be right as the quarter-final attendance exceeded that figure.) Regardless, it would seem to be a reasonably small maximum capacity, so it is clear that for that ground to be not "really very full" as per Melissa's recollection the attendances must have been surprisingly small. The official figures bear that out: the Gillette Stadium hosted one Group B game, between South Korea and Norway, and one Group C game, between Canada and Japan, as a double-header (i.e., both games on the same day) attracting 14,356 fans; and then two quarter-finals as a double-header, between Brazil and Sweden and then United States and Norway, attracting 25,103.

2007 – China

China hosted the 2007 tournament,¹ and perhaps it is unsurprising that a largely Anglo-American-Australian-centric set of respondents recorded no attendance at this Women's World Cup, and reported few strong memories of the matches watched on television.

2011 – Germany

Germany were the first European hosts of the Women's World Cup in the new millennium. There were big plans for this tournament, with the

budget increased to 51 million euros, intended to be recouped by ticket sales (Williams, 2013: 84).

Charlotte, a US fan, followed that tournament intently via the media; as a student at the time she had spare time to do so, but bearing in mind the time difference, it also reflects her dedication and interest. She recalled:

That [tournament] was occurring as I was moving from Austin to Atlanta, and my mum was driving with me and helping me move, and I remember like when she was taking the wheel once just investigating, OK, like, where's, googling soccer bars Atlanta, timing so we could get there in enough time to watch. I think it was the US versus Brazil semi-final, and memory is a tricky thing so I can't remember any of the specifics, but my memory is that it was in the soccer bar ... just filled to the brim in Atlanta, and like sweaty and gross, because we were moving, and I was like, "No, we're going," and being there for the Rapinoe to Wambach cross then header at the last minute and just like elation, amazing. That is pretty high up there [as a vivid memory of the Women's World Cup]. Then of course dragging myself upright in bed after my 21st birthday, that's the story I tell everybody, you want to know how dedicated I am to this, even because I was living in a dorm and not everybody had cable and television, I was like among my group of friends, I was like, "Anybody who wants to come watch it can, I'm not going to be getting out of bed, but you're welcome to join me, in the chair of my dorm." It was a 13-inch TV I had, but it was still just like, you know, I woke up and I was like this is it, and I was like, you know, maybe they'll win it for my birthday. No.

Ron, based in Canada, found his interest in women's football piqued by the success of the US team, although he did not become a fan of theirs. Although he had vague memories of the 1999 tournament, his real fandom began when he watched the 2011 tournament, despite the awkward time zone, and he started to follow Japan's results more closely due to being a fan of Japanese popular culture. He recalled:

In terms of [when my] real interest started, I was aware of it in the 1999 US World Cup, when the US won that, but the last one, 2011, how the US kept pulling out last-minute win after last-minute win, it made me go, hmm, and I ended up watching the entire final and rooting for Japan on that one, and then the Olympics the next year. I realised, "Wait a second, I've ended up watching more of the Canadian soccer than any other sport this games," and then, "Oh, it's coming to Canada, but it's not coming to Toronto."

(Ron ended up making a flying visit to Winnipeg during the Women's World Cup 2015 just to see one game.)

The excellent organisation of the tournament in Germany was commented upon multiple times. (Indeed, I attended this tournament as a journalist, and it was possibly the best-organised, smoothest-running sporting event I have ever been to, with clear instructions, signposting and information points when required.) Lisa and her partner Ann had travelled around Germany to watch various matches, and here she reflects and compares the experience to attending a World Cup in her own country, the United States:

That [going to Germany] was thrilling again too, that was so celebrated, even knowing the women's game isn't as celebrated as the men's game, there was still a buzz in the air, it was partly represented just by the banners and things that were up all over the place, and by having them create a fan zone. I suppose we must have done that in the US, but I didn't see any of those, and because the games were where I live we didn't see much of the extra things, but in Germany we certainly did, and I just loved it...We stayed in one small town, in kind of the northwest, and I was trying to remember all of the different stadiums, we went to Leverkusen, we went to Borussia Moenchengladbach, we went to Wolfsburg, I think we went to two others and I don't remember the name of them, the transportation there was great and it was free with your World Cup ticket on World Cup day, you could get on any form of transportation for free, so that added to it as well, you just wore your ticket, showed it to the conductor, and off you went, so that, it was really celebrated. That was nice.

Lisa's frequent use of the word "celebrated" is significant here; I would argue that after the disappointing attendances and lack of hype at the 2003 tournament and then the neglect of the 2007 Women's World Cup (partially because of its being hosted in China, and perhaps partially because the United States were knocked out in the semi-final), she as an American was thus refreshed and pleasantly surprised to see Germany take the tournament so seriously, to invest so heavily in it, to promote it to such an extent and to welcome the fans from around the world so warmly. In addition, as this book has highlighted and will discuss further, women's sport in general has historically largely been ignored or diminished in comparison to men's sport; it is plausible that to see a major women's sporting tournament treated as an important event in this way was a surprise to Lisa.

Overview of the 2015 Women's World Cup

As previously noted, much of the pre-tournament publicity had focused on the use of artificial pitches in Canada. However, the 2015 Women's

World Cup was also the biggest ever, with an expanded number of teams, and an additional round-of-16 before the quarter-finals. Journalists spotted before the tournament that the seedings and brackets allowed for top teams France and Germany to potentially clash in the last eight (which they did); this was because seeds were allocated to specific groups rather than allowing it to pan out randomly. Several people speculated that this might have been to pave way for a potential United States versus Canada final and thus guarantee ticket sales; but it also meant that big hitters France and England were positioned for their first group games on the east coast, minimising the time difference to Europe and maximising TV audiences back at home. A FIFA spokesperson practically confirmed this when they were quoted by *Sports Illustrated* as saying: “[T]eams are seeded and allocated into specific groups for ticketing and promotion reasons” (2015).

Annie, an England fan based in the United States, reported that she thought people had a general lack of awareness that the tournament was happening, even in Canada itself. She attributed this partially to the choice of the host cities; as discussed earlier, many fans of women's football identified the choice of Moncton as a host town as a problematic one, and she concurred with this as she said:

When I got to the airport and went through immigration, the immigration officer said why are you in Canada, and I was like, “I’m here to watch the World Cup,” and he was like, “Oh, yeah, I heard that was going on, maybe I’ll try to catch a game.” That doesn’t happen in the men’s World Cup. People just don’t know. I guess if they were trying to span those stadiums across the country, Moncton’s kind of a weird location for it, given the size of the stadium and that it’s on a college campus... the tickets weren’t sold out for today, they were saying there’s a few hundred left... Would it have been sold out if it was in Toronto or Winnipeg? People want to see England and France.

However, respondents who watched games in the bigger cities also reported a lack of awareness around the event as well as a lack of organisation. US fan Cassie additionally highlighted what she felt was a patronising tone to some of the organisation and coverage, particularly mentioning the tournament’s mascot, a slightly anthropomorphised owl, clearly marked as female with very long eyelashes and pink “lipstick” around her beak. She said:

When I was in Winnipeg the city seemed small. It just didn’t seem like it was equipped to handle or even believed that it was handling a world-class event. There was a sense of there’s this throwaway event that’s happening over in

Winnipeg Stadium, so you get there and it's all American fans, which is great, and obviously we know how to mobilise, but yeah, it felt small, and then over to Vancouver, which is supposed to be the crowning jewel of the tournament, and it still felt small at BC Place. 55,000 fans, that's great, but it didn't feel – on some level it feels patronising in terms of the way that even the sport is spoken about and the way the sport has been treated up in Canada, like oh, look at this cute little event, and look at this furry owl with lipstick mascot that we have, and look at how great those girls are doing, that sort of thing. That's just sort of the general vibe I'm getting from it, and it just feels like a step backwards from what I experienced in '99... all of these decisions that have been made, whether it comes to what we talked about before with the draw, to six time zones, why the hell is it spread across six time zones, that makes no sense, all of these decisions that are being made for quote unquote marketing and promotional reasons as opposed to foster competition, that's the most insulting thing you could possibly do to a world-class event, because you basically walk into it and you concede that no one cares about this, and so we have to make all of these decisions, who cares about equal playing field and maximising the level of competition by making things fair for everyone? Let's make all of these concessions because we already come in defeated as FIFA, we don't think anybody's going to be watching this.

Cassie's argument here is that FIFA do not view the Women's World Cup as elite international competition, the seeding and fixtures have been tilted to maximise viewing audiences as far as possible rather than relying on the luck of the draw as is usual in tournaments, and effectively they are thus happy to take what they can get in terms of venues, publicity and media coverage. The effort to put France and England in the same group with matches on the east coast (and thus just a five-hour time difference with London, six with Paris) was a point raised by several respondents; and even those who understood or accepted the reasoning felt that the choice of Moncton as a host was a serious flaw in the planning stages. Danielle, a Canadian fan who lived on the east coast of the country, said:

When it comes to sports games, it's been a bone of contention because Halifax is a way bigger city and a huge, much larger market [than Moncton], but we don't have a proper stadium. So having the game at Moncton was pitch-wise the equivalent of doing it at a major university, you just happen to have more seats, because they have redone that stadium to host games from the under-20s [U20s Women's World Cup] last year, so when it comes to getting events, Moncton definitely is more clever, but I thought that geographically it's so far removed. Like, the games for the World Cup, Canada is way too

big of a country to host something like that when fans have absolutely no possibility of going to all the games or even a variety. Canada played their first two games in Alberta. Alberta is an eight-hour flight [from the east coast of Canada], and it would cost three thousand, four thousand dollars to get there, and then Montreal [for the third and final group game], people from here, I do know people who are going to the Montreal game on Monday, so the whole idea and I guess in practice of getting games to the east coast was great because we do have quite a big soccer market here, but just the actual application of it was just garbage.

Danielle raises several important points here. First, she emphasises once again that Moncton is hosting these major tournament games at a university stadium, which would be unthinkable for a men's World Cup. Second, she suggests that a bigger town or city on the east coast would have been more easily accessible for both domestic and international travellers, and by implication would have been able to attract more fans to matches. Third, she highlights the near-impossibility to follow a team over the course of the tournament because of the sheer distance between the host cities, and the expense it would accrue (and it is interesting that she also highlights that because of the size of the country, people in Canada will find it equally difficult to follow their national team rather than having a home advantage). She is willing to concede the point that the principle of having games on the east coast was a good one, both for the international market and for the home fans, but the rollout of the plans simply was not good enough for an elite competition.

She also discussed her poor experience at the first Moncton game, which gave her additional evidence for her criticism of the tournament planning. She said:

We got to where they held the game at, Universite de Moncton, it was at the local university, and they had sold parking passes, but there was only like a hundred, they were charging 20 dollars, they sold out really quickly and then they said, "Well, no problem, everyone park at the Moncton Coliseum" – which is a local sports arena – "and there will be shuttles that will take you to the university", so when we got there, which was, well, kick-off was 2, we got there around 20 to 1, there was probably maybe five, six hundred people in front of us, and there were three, like, regular school-bus-size buses going back and forth, and the drive there and back was 20 minutes. So imagine, gosh, maximum, there was one, like, proper coach, so the max that would hold would be like 50 people, so within a 20-minute span they were only moving 40 people there and back, so by the time we got there to the university it was 25 past 2, we missed the first goal, we missed almost the entire first half,

and I would say that behind us in the queue to get shuttles there was probably 4,000 people, who would have completely missed the first game, and probably a lot of them even parts of the second game. There would have been no way they would have gotten everyone there on time. It was ridiculous, and I thought organisation-wise it was a no-brainer. You know how many tickets you sell, you know how many parking passes were sold, so do the math and you have 11,000 people who need to get to the university, so three buses on a 20-minute return journey is not going to get 11,000 people there, and there was no other transportation – people were calling cabs from the queue to get on the shuttles.

Mark, who was originally from England but relocated to Canada for study, agreed that the planning and the execution of those plans in Moncton for the first group games left much to be desired. After hundreds of fans missed the kick-off for the games due to queuing for the tournament shuttle buses and then queuing to get into the Moncton Stadium, as Danielle described, which had only around 13,000 capacity, officials were quoted in the media referring to people arriving at the ground only in time for kick-off, due to “a little bit of a maritime laid-back approach”, suggesting that all the fans who were there were locals. Mark had been in these queues, but disagreed with the officials, suggesting instead that the problematic attitude came from the event organisers, who were not taking the tournament seriously.

Mark said:

At the moment there are quite a lot of problems going around, financial kind of problems in the province, and there's a lack of business and opportunity here, and I think that's the kind of attitude that fosters that kind of approach, oh, we're all laid-back and chilled out here, we're just small-time people, the FIFA World Cup is a, it's a really big event and we're really lucky to have it but you know, we're chilled and laid-back and not going to take it seriously. That's kind of very patronising, I feel, because there are a lot of very serious people here, and there's a lot of very business-oriented people, and it's kind of frustrating to see that that attitude still remains. I think the people there were, I guess, kind of taken by surprise. It is kind of a little bit, a lot of what we've been talking about in the build-up to the World Cup has been about the difference between the women's World Cup and the men's World Cup. The men would never have to play on 3G pitches, and similarly within the men's game it would be unacceptable to have people who have lined up for an hour and be 30 minutes late. That, I find, kind of, yeah, I mean, if this was the men's World Cup that would be totally unacceptable and that would be a huge story, a very very big deal, and for them to come out and say oh, we're kind of laid-back, I think that's definitely not good enough.

He implies here, of course, that the queues and delays were brushed over and did not attract a huge amount of comment simply because the game the fans were waiting to see would be contested by women. Ron, also in Canada, suggested that the Women's World Cup was simply being neglected by Canadians because Canada does not have a strong football tradition. He said:

I don't feel like everyone's stopping their day to watch the games, let's put it like that. I don't know what the ratings were for the opening match, it certainly sold out Commonwealth Stadium, which is good to see, but in terms of, if you compare it to, Stanley Cup seems a little bit more insular, Chicago and Tampa Bay, but I'm just thinking of something like Olympic hockey, where everyone shuts down and will watch the first-round match against Lithuania – let's all watch!

Ron does not invoke any gender aspect here; instead, he focuses on the contrasting sporting traditions, arguing that millions of people would watch an ice hockey match involving Canada regardless of the opposition because that is one of the country's national sports, but he thought it unlikely that any equivalent viewing figures would be garnered by a match involving Canada at their home Women's World Cup.² Of course, one of the reasons for allocating a major tournament to a country could be to promote the sport, but the evidence from respondents suggests that this has not been entirely successful.

Annie, an Englishwoman who relocated to the United States for work and for her relationship, travelled to watch England's group games, but she reported that she did not have to plan very extensively to ensure that she got a ticket to the matches or to arrange her travel. When asked how long she had been planning the trip, she replied: "For the last two weeks," before going on to clarify:

In my head, a really long time. My wife is American and one of my best friends is Canadian, so we talked about it four years ago, after the last World Cup – "Wherever the next one is, we'll go." When tickets went on sale, I'd just started a job and didn't have a lot of time off and thought I really couldn't make it happen, and so I just said to myself, "Oh, we'll just watch it on TV, we'll have friends over," and then about a month ago I was in England and started to see all the hype, and thought, "I've got to go, I've got to go." My wife couldn't come so I was like I'll find someone else who wants to go, so I asked [my friend Bonnie], and two weeks ago we booked our tickets, so really it was the last four years, since Germany ended, but really only two weeks ago.

Annie's anecdote shows that the ticket sales for the tournament were not impressive as she was able to get hold of them just a fortnight before the

match, but implicit in that is the reasonableness of the ticket pricing – she did not have to save a huge amount of money for these matches, the only likely obstacle to her attendance was always being able to book the time off work. This may be the pinnacle of women's international football, but the tickets are not accorded the same luxury, top-echelon pricing as the men's equivalent. Similarly, the concurrent events around the tournament – the tourist provision, the fan zones, the decoration in the host cities – were also reported to be rather less blatant and low key than would be expected in the men's World Cup.

Lisa described her experience of the host cities in the first fortnight of the tournament, saying:

It feels a lot more low-key so far, it is early days, there are banners, and some pubs and restaurants have got signs out front that show that they're World Cup-friendly if you want to watch a match in their pub, but it seems a lot more low-key to me, and it's kind of disappointing. The first match that opened the stadium, the BC Place Stadium, didn't have any sort of a ceremony; we always arrive as early as we can for a match, and there were no vendors outside the stadium, and the inside of the stadium was apparently stripped down to represent only things that align with FIFA. I've never been to BC Place but that's what one of the BC Place employees commented to my friend Anne, that they really stripped it down, so getting there early meant we sat there in an empty stadium in an empty field. Usually we watch players warm up, and we did get to see some of that, but there was no recognition of opening the stadium, so it was sort of pointless to go early to an opening World Cup match, I've never had that experience before.

Again, here FIFA's control over the tournament and its environs is criticised by Lisa as she suggests that the lack of ceremony and pomp around the Women's World Cup is almost symptomatic of neglect of the sport while the governing body focuses only on tangential commercial aspects.

These are some of the respondents' initial reactions to the tournament's organisation and presentation; it seems increasingly clear that there was a significant amount of fan dissatisfaction around the planning and scheduling of the matches, much of it directed at FIFA, with several people suggesting that the Women's World Cup was treated as less important and interesting by the governing body, by the media and the public at large simply because it is a women's tournament. I move now to assess some of the more specific themes that emerged during the qualitative interviews.

Notes

- 1 It is worth noting here FIFA's emphasis on the United States and China as hosts for the early editions of the Women's World Cup – very large, very populous countries where the men's game was not prioritised above all else, and where there was space for the women's game to take root and develop. Effectively hosting this kind of major tournament twice in these two countries was free advertising to a vast population. It is also interesting that in 2015, after the Women's World Cup, the *Guardian* newspaper published a feature by Owen Gibson about football in China, which speculated about the way it could develop, but made literally no mention about the girls and women playing the game nor the two Women's World Cups the country had previously hosted (<http://www.theguardian.com/football/2015/sep/08/china-focus-football-global-game>).
- 2 He may indeed be correct, although an average audience of 3.2 million people watched Canada's quarter-final match against England; but in terms of in-person attendance, Canada set a new record for a national team in any sport when they attracted 54,027 people to that quarter-final.

4

The Experience of England Fans in Canada and in Domestic Competition

► *Abstract: This chapter focuses most specifically on the data from the interviews with England fans who attended matches in Canada during the Women's World Cup. It concentrates on their broad experience of women's football and how they began to engage with the sport, both domestically and internationally, and their practices of fandom (including match attendance routines, displays of fandom and involvement in fan organisations or online fan activity).*

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Becoming a fan of women's football

Many respondents – not just England fans but those from all over the world – expressed an interest in all forms of football, men's and women's and of various levels. The FA have focused on developing a fanbase for domestic women's football since the launch of the Women's Super League in 2011, but only one respondent from my sample reported any real attachment to a FAWSL team. Ironically, that was Annie, who is originally from England but now lives in the United States, and can attend matches only when she visits her family. Annie spoke very engagingly about her first-ever match watching her WSL team, Bristol Academy, while on holiday in England, saying:

Siobhan Chamberlain [then the Bristol goalkeeper] posted something [on Twitter] on like, "Who's coming to the game next week?" and I was like, "I'm flying all the way from Atlanta, and I'm coming, and the Bristol Academy game, it's going to be my first Bristol Academy game in person!" and she was like, "Oh, that's amazing, we have to get you a signed programme." So I met up with her after the game and she had a programme signed by the whole team. I feel that in the women's game there's a lot more fan engagement, which I appreciate. If you're a fan of the men's game, you don't get attention to individual fans in that way.

This reflects Williams's discussions on what precisely female athletes are perceived to "mean" by their fans (2013: 14). England fan Joe talked about his experience following a small team during the late 1990s and said that he felt like he had "twenty little sisters" due to the connection he perceived he had with them.

This emphasis on individual fan engagement and players being able to personalise fans' matchday and general supporting experiences has been key to the FA's marketing strategies. Their plan in 2010 emphasises the accessibility of players – in sharp contrast to male footballers – with each WSL club required to appoint a "digital ambassador" who would take the primary responsibility for interacting with the fan base through social media strategies.

This is also reflected in other women's football leagues, and Williams argues that this player accessibility has also been crucial to the various incarnations of the professional women's league in the United States (2013: 82). Although the strength of this tie has varied according to the marketing strategies in place, it has been a common thread throughout; most recently the players of the Portland Thorns took to Twitter in

the summer of 2015 to personally thank individuals who had renewed their season tickets,¹ and the club held a party for all those season ticket holders.²

However, this strong link between players and fans is not always of benefit. Timothy F Graine (2012: 77) in his chronicle of women's soccer in America highlights the ways in which players have invoked the idea of their position of role models to create almost a moral imperative: people should support women's football and the leagues because it is a good thing – rather than a profitable or appealing thing – to do, particularly for girls and young women. This has led to sponsorships and investment being rather limited as companies shied away from supporting a sport that had such strong ties with a relatively small (and relatively poor) demographic.

Following England abroad

England's attendance and performance at major international tournaments has been patchy in recent years. Since the first official FIFA Women's World Cup in 1991, England have qualified in 1995, 2007, 2011 and now 2015; in terms of UEFA European Championships, England qualified in 1984, 1987, 1995, 2001, 2005, 2009 and 2013.

Because of the amount of time and travel involved (as well as the uncertainties of following a team at an international tournament, not knowing how long one's tournament might last and what cities one might be in) it is often difficult for fans to attend such major occasions. It was fascinating to me to discover that very few of my respondents who were following England were actually regular travellers to the team's games hosted abroad. Instead, they had been enticed to attend – and travel across the Atlantic – for a variety of reasons.

Joe was typical when he spoke about being able to attend the group stages in Canada simply because he could manage to get the time off work and had the available cash, but hoped he would be able to get to more tournaments in the future. Although he had attended one match abroad before and attended matches regularly in England, this was his first tournament. He said:

First time I've been to a tournament abroad. I normally go to all the home competitive games, and I go to the friendlies if it's a ground I haven't done before because I like ticking off grounds. I go to all the home games. The only

time I've travelled abroad with them before was to a qualifier in Holland in 2002, I'm on a bit of a limited budget at the moment so I think it's going to be home games only again after this tournament, but I'm hoping to get to the Euros in Holland.

His appetite for travel following England had obviously been whetted; and it is significant to note his loyalty, that even on a limited budget he was still planning to attend home games, which may also involve a great deal of travel as the women's internationals circulate around the country.

Several fans were treating the entire experience as more akin to a holiday. Sara and her partner Lina had travelled in Canada previously and welcomed the opportunity to return and combine it with football-watching. She explained:

As soon as we found out that Canada had got the World Cup, the agreement was wherever England was based that's where we would go. We had to wait right up until the draw to find out. We were originally hoping, we were kind of secretly hoping for either Ottawa or Vancouver, never been to Ottawa before and we went to Vancouver five years for their Winter Olympics, but when we found out Moncton it was just the opportunity to come somewhere new.

Neither had travelled to watch women's football previously, although they had watched international matches in England when they were hosted close to their home. They were inspired to follow women's football by the London 2012 Olympics and Paralympics, when both contributed to the events as volunteers. Lina said:

We've never travelled for England football before. I've been up to see a couple of men's games at Wembley, we live on the south coast, just outside Worthing, so we went to the Amex in Brighton when they played there last April, but that's the only games we've travelled for, but, so that's football-specific, we did go to the Winter Olympics for our honeymoon in 2010 in Vancouver, which was fantastic. Because of the experience we had there, we both decided, literally in Vancouver, we both wanted to volunteer at the London Olympics, which we did, Sara volunteered at the Paralympics, I volunteered at the Olympics, and for me it's more about general support, showing that support, and getting involved. You can't complain that nothing happens if you don't do it.

Sara added:

We kind of got into women's football around London 2012, seeing how well they [Team GB women's football team] did, and the support that was behind

them, we were just overwhelmed with the progress of women's football and how watchable, sometimes you watch local Saturday afternoon, and watch women's football, whether there's not the support there or whatever, and we got into it then, watched a few games on TV. I don't watch any men's football whatsoever so for me to come out here and be watching football is quite a big thing, but they'll definitely have our support in the future, and dependent on, it would be country-dependent, obviously [Lina] and I being a same-sex couple there would be certain countries that we wouldn't visit, so we felt more than at home coming to Canada, but yeah, this is really our first foray into a big football event.

Rose and Sue were a little more straightforward in their attitude towards their Canada trip; it was purely a holiday, and watching England was a complete novelty. Rose explained:

It was purely because we like to go on holiday and do things, watch things, we don't really like to sit on a beach. Don't get me wrong, if someone made us, we'd do it, but I like America, I've only been to America once, you've been to Canada before, haven't you, when you were younger, so it just seemed like the perfect match, really, plus we travel on our own, women on our own, we wanted to be somewhere a bit safer, really, somewhere that felt a bit comfortable to go to. I'd never heard of Moncton, I must admit, before the draw, I think some Canadians hadn't heard of Moncton, but that was the reason, really, it's just our summer holiday and we incorporate it into some way to watch football. We'd never seen England play before.

What was particularly intriguing, though, was the respondents had already gained so much enjoyment from their trip and from following England that they were already planning their next tournament travel. This was not solely because England did well in the tournament, either; some of these interviews were conducted during the group stage so this enjoyment was not predicated just on the team's success, but on the experience and the atmosphere. Sue and Rose also highlighted how much they enjoyed being able to speak to and engage with the players.

Sue said: "We were googling last night, where's the next World Cup, where's the Euros? We'll do it again. There's the Euros, and the next World Cup is 2019, so we'll go to that, France is a bit nearer. It's a bit of a trek over here." Rose added: "Because we've got so close to the players and followed it actively for like the last week, it gets you more interested in them as individuals as well, who they play for at home. We said about going to see a couple of matches at a ground close to us, Everton or Liverpool, so I think we will now, definitely."

Supporting women's football

During interviews with England fans, it became increasingly clear that several of them followed women's football as a deliberate choice and as a contrast to men's football. They talked at length about the ways in which they understand and define women's football and its qualities and did so against men's football.

Joe described why he likes women's football thus:

There's less aggression, there's less lumping long balls forward, there's more emphasis on skill and flair play, and it's a cliché but it's true, you just don't see the prima donna antics instances of the men's Premiership in the women's game. It doesn't happen. These are real people playing for the love of the game, even the few full-time pros making a realistic wage, so your fan can relate more to the female player, definitely.

Lina had a similar stance, explaining that she had stopped watching men's football because of the players' off-field behaviour: "I do like football, but I have to be honest I've become more and more frustrated with it over the last few years with the actions of players, the overall, I find it much harder to support the England men's team because there's so many of the players that I find frankly objectionable."

Rose was less explicit about players' behaviour, but still pointed to the contrasting styles of play, explaining that what attracted her to women's football was

[j]ust the style of the game, with the women's game a bit slower, it might be perceived to not be as aggressive, not the same sort of fast pace, really. I think you've just got to get your head round that and you'll see that they're just as skilful, it's just as enjoyable to watch, if you separate the two types of game. It's a bit like men's and women's tennis. You watch men's tennis and it's pretty much just forearm smash smash smash, very fast-paced; you watch the women's game and you get a lot more rallies, slower pace, so that's how I see it, really.

Fascinatingly, almost two decades previously, Sue Lopez made exactly the same observation about male fans of women's football, reporting that they preferred the slower pace of the game because it reminded them of men's football before it became 'so professional and commercialised' (1997: 208). It is indicative of a philosophical split between the two "types" of the game, but rather unusually the negative qualities were all associated with the men's game, casting it as abject and Other. In addition, this is in

contrast to how the women's side of traditionally British sports are usually defined and described, as normally players, commentators and fans are at pains to point out the similarities of the games; for example, Wright and Clarke's analysis of the coverage of women's rugby in England highlights a discourse which describes the men's and women's versions of the game as similar, and the players as similar in their behaviour – on and off the pitch, from how hard they tackle to how hard they drink (1999: 239).

However, conversely, this effort to almost mythologise and idealise the game also creates a problem for women's football, one which has been seen in sociology and indeed society multiple times; this dichotomy ends up casting women and the women's game as simply "morally good" where men are not, rather than just treating both as sport and their participants as human. Football scholars have previously argued for encouraging more women to attend men's games because their civilising presence would encourage men to behave better; here fans suggest that the women's game deserves more support because of their "moral goodness", their honesty, their good behaviour. This is, surely, two sides of the same coin, circumscribing women's behaviour either way.

Joe's description is particularly interesting, casting women's football and its players as the descendants of the Corinthian tradition, enjoying the game and playing simply for love of it rather than financial reward, very reminiscent of Jean Williams's conclusion that women's football relies on the perceived good qualities of its players in order to promote itself (2013: 99). Of course, all the England players in the squad for 2015 were professional footballers, making a living from the game (bar Claire Rafferty, who continued to work part-time as a financial analyst in the City through her own choice). The discourse of the plucky part-timer, though, continues to permeate the discourse around women's football in England; partly this is because professionalisation is a relatively recent phenomenon, but I would also suggest that it also suits those involved in the sport to create that additional distance between the men's and women's games. As Rose says, it is a different style of play entirely; emphasising the difference also emphasises that it is not a choice between men's and women's football, and that one can enjoy both or either. As respondents' narratives have already shown (and will continue to show through the rest of the book) part of the attraction of women's football is the opportunity to engage directly with players, and if as Joe says part of the appeal is thinking that these elite athletes are "real people", just like us, then that façade must be maintained.

United States, Canada and Australia: fans at the Women's World Cup

This section leads on from the previous one, but looks at the experience of women's football and the Women's World Cup from the perspective of fans of teams other than England, primarily the United States, Canada and Australia. It looks at their broad experience of the 2015 tournament and also how their fandom of women's football developed, and makes comparisons and draws out contrasts between these narratives and those of England fans.

Overview of the 2015 Women's World Cup

Charlotte, a US fan, wanted to see whatever matches she could at the tournament, not limiting herself just to following her team. She said:

We got a stadium half-pass, we bought our tickets, I bought two tickets, and my mum is going to join me for the first couple of matches, and my twin brother is going to join me for the semi-final that's on that one, and so we bought those tickets, they became available before the groups were announced and before which groups were where were announced. So I was just banking on I'll be happy to see women's soccer whatever. So that was pretty much it, I didn't really have a say in what games I would go see because of all these circumstances, but being a fan of the sport, being excited to go, I'm really happy, it's sad not to see the US, but I still have hope [that they will make it to the semi-final for which we have tickets].

Cassie, another US fan, had been to matches at the 1999 World Cup but this was her first big tournament since then. As with previous American respondents discussed elsewhere, the 1999 Women's World Cup experience loomed large over her narrative, and she admitted she was holding up the 2015 tournament to the standards set in 1999, not just in terms of the United States's success but in terms of the organisation and the attendances. She said:

It's easy to feel incredibly spoilt as an American soccer fan, especially for a women's soccer fan. Our national team, when they play friendlies at home, they're selling out stadiums that are bigger than what we're seeing at the women's World Cup, just for a friendly, so that's the fan support I'm used to, and again spoilt by the 99 World Cup, being in the Rose Bowl, being among

99,000 fans on a blistering hot day in LA, being part of an iconic moment in not just women's sport history but sports history, and I was up in the nosebleeds, I couldn't see anything down there, I barely knew what Brandi Chastain did, I think I found out after, you know, all I saw were specks on the field, but it was a good, incredibly amazing moment, and a moment that galvanised me not just as a sports fan but based on what I do nowadays, writing about women's sport and things like that, a lot of it can be traced back to that day. For myself it's easy to just expect that of everything.

Supporting women's football

In contrast to the England fans, female American and Canadian fans of women's football were not relative newcomers to women's football. As Markovits and Hellerman point out, women's football tends to succeed in countries where the sport has not already been occupied by men (2003: 14) and this is certainly the case in the North American region. Many of them spoke about playing football as children and then watching women's football as a result.

Charlotte was a good example; she said:

I started playing when I was five, that was definitely the first one, I was on a kiddy league with my twin brother, and my dad coached, and it was just a bunch of five-year-olds running around, and trying to kick the ball in some direction, and then you know, stuck through it, had a good time, got on a girls' team that my mum was the assistant coach for, and fairly soon I shot up, I hit 5' 11" in the sixth grade, when I was, you know, like, 11, and so I'd always been fairly tall, and also a little bit chubby, and so of course fairly quickly it was like try goal, but I loved it, and it totally worked, and so I played consistently from five years old till 16, and then that was the point, in my local women's soccer, either you are committed enough to join the upper level travelling team or you're no longer playing soccer, and I was like there weren't enough people like me who were like, well, I don't have the time enough for that, but I still want to play soccer, so that was the only two years of my life where I didn't play regularly on a team, I played junior varsity in high school, I played in college, even got on a team when I studied abroad in London, and went to graduate school and immediately during orientation I overheard two women talking about soccer and I was like, soccer, are you on a team, do you need a goalkeeper? Had been playing in local women's leagues weekly for the last six or so years, so playing is a big part of it, but it was right place, right time, because I turned 13 in 1999.

Again, Charlotte harks back to that pivotal 1999 Women's World Cup, which took place at a time when she was old enough to appreciate the magnitude of the victory and had enough playing experience herself to understand the matches.

Heather, a generation older, was less influenced by the recent achievements of the US women's team, and had begun her football career as many English women of a similar age did – playing alongside boys because there were no girls' teams to join. She recalled:

I'm 40 now, and I started playing, I was probably 5 or 6 years old. Of course we didn't have any girls' teams, so played with the boys, beat up on them a little bit, for me, I think the best thing to say about it for me is I really fell in love with the game. I found my home, so to speak, it was the place where I belonged. It was on the soccer pitch. It just grew from there. I actually took time away from the game, just moving, and life, and did different sports, and when I came to Portland, this was probably about eight, almost nine years ago, I started playing again. Portland is a fantastic city for football, and we're just very fortunate to have the kind of fanbase that we do for men's and women's football, it's a very special city, adult leagues all over the place and it's a real big community here, again, it's kind of like finding my home again.

Danielle, a Canada fan in her thirties, had grown up watching women's football, indicating that the sport had historically been taken seriously in that country (as Hall, 2003, confirms) although she had not played it herself in adulthood. She said:

I'm a huge soccer fan. I'm a Manchester City fan. My husband's from Scotland and he lived in England for years, he's actually an Arsenal and a Portsmouth fan, I'm a Portsmouth fan too, but different divisions, and I've followed soccer pretty much my whole life, I played as a kid, but I'm borderline obsessive about it. I live in the wrong country to be a football enthusiast... I've followed women's football for years. Canadians are, when it comes to sport, there's a lot of fair-weather fans because of the patriotic aspect of it, so people who might not ever watch football ever, like including the MLS, which is the closest we have to Premier League here, they won't watch, but when it comes to Olympic sports or World Cup sports, they will watch, but I've watched women's football since I was a kid, really, both Canadian and American because the American team was always just superior, and I've followed a lot of the England team in the past year especially because there's five [Manchester] City players on the England national team, so that's always interesting, but it's really a patriotic thing, if you love soccer or football, and when it comes to anything that Canada can win over the US, everyone just jumps on the bandwagon.

Hall (2003: 30) defines football as the “game of choice” for girls under the age of 14 in Canada, and this does seem to be borne out by Canadian respondents as well as their American neighbours. It is significant to note here that the American and Canadian narratives focus on the competition and success in women’s football as an attractive feature, as one might expect of any sport. There is no real dimension of contrast with men’s football as was seen in the England fans’ responses, possibly because in the North American region “soccer” has often been treated as a women’s sport rather than one with all the connotations of working-class masculinity that it has in England.

Notes

- 1 For example, see Lianne Sanderson’s Twitter message: <https://twitter.com/liannesanderson/status/636621477761056768>, and a fan’s reaction: “What the @ThornsFC players are doing giving twitter shoutouts to renewing season ticket holders is pretty cool. Such a fantastic group”: <https://twitter.com/MoeRaise/status/636633724688297984>.
- 2 You can see pictures of the season ticket holder party on the Portland Thorns official Twitter account: <https://twitter.com/ThornsFC/status/638812917031378944>

5

Gender, Identity and Football

Abstract: This chapter focuses on the responses of female fans of women's football who highlighted a more political and implicit reason for their active support of the sport in general and at the Women's World Cup 2015 more specifically. These respondents discussed their desire to support other women's sporting achievement, and a smaller sub-section explained their interest in women's football as an important part of their LGBTQ identity. This is, obviously, not to suggest that men do not support women's football; previous and later chapters in this book show very clearly that men too are fans of the women's game. However, the data gained in Canada does show some interesting and significant facets of women's support of women's sport, which are discussed here.

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Women supporting women

Stirling and Schulz (2011: 54) argue that women playing sport is transgressive in its very existence, and that women's sporting success is a simultaneous rejection of traditional feminine values and behaviour. Some female fans from various countries talked about political motivation for watching women's football, speaking of the need to support other women and encourage this kind of achievement. Annie (who was English but based in the United States) explicitly defined herself as a feminist, and she was one of these. She explained:

I'm really invested in supporting women's sporting endeavours. I just tend to follow women's sport more in general, the women's game. The fan engagement is one piece; I also like just watching the game a lot more. I feel a lot more like, well, for political reasons, I feel that there's a big political investment in women supporting other women's sports, and that kind of advocacy reasons, but also I just like it more, it's a lot less, how can I put this, I just feel like the game is played more as opposed to performed, acted, with the diving and everything else. I like that the women's game is at a slightly slower pace, I feel that I can really take my time getting into the game, there's no more theatrics. I think just like I feel more personally invested in a particular player or a team doing well, the sort of thing they have to overcome to get to that point, but I also really enjoy the sport itself.

Obviously here she is mirroring some of the reasons that other England fans gave for watching women's football, making plain the perceived division between the qualities found in the men's and women's games; but she also mentions more briefly her more overtly political and feminist motivations. She sees women supporting women's sport as a piece of advocacy, not simply a sporting choice. Bonnie, a friend of hers from the United States, agreed; it was obvious in interview that she was not necessarily a huge fan of the sport but was specifically a fan of women's football. She explained:

My interest in soccer started in college, a few of my friends went to a Division Three school, in terms of sports, and so they were like, "Oh, it's really interesting, you should come hang around with us," and somehow I ended up on the team, obviously as the worst player, but that's fine, and so it started from there, with my interest really piqued, and then from there, oh, women's soccer, this is really cool, there are some awesome players, and really I followed the American team on Twitter and didn't realise it, oh, this is why I know all these people's names and faces. So I think for me it's about being in sports culture,

being around people who are cheering other women. I don't think women get their due in sports. Every time I turn on ESPN or particularly in America it's always about the men, male basketball, male football, whatever is happening, and it's never about what women are doing, it's all these really great female athletes and they're not talked about, and so I'd rather put my money there.

Bonnie highlights (the neglect of) commercial aspects of women's sport, not just the reduced media coverage it gets but also her own money that she invests in sport through her fandom. She would rather endorse female athletes as some kind of counterbalance to their invisibility to other sections of the sports-watching population.

LGBTQ identity

Another aspect of a more political motivation for fandom was revealed when many female fans – again, from various countries – talked about the way that their identity as LGBTQ women was reflected or shaped by their interest in women's football, and discussed how they position high-profile out gay female footballers as identifiable role models. Again, this is similar to Williams's discussion (2013: 14) of the “meanings” fans attribute to female athletes; they can be perceived as role models, but not simply for their sporting achievements. Annie was again perhaps the most articulate on this topic, and she expressed deep concern about the way that the governing bodies for women's football tried to gloss over or hide the number of LGBTQ women involved in the sport. She argued that it was not necessary to make a choice between marketing to families and acknowledging and welcoming the LGBTQ fans.

She said:

Women's Professional Soccer, the last league that failed [in the United States], they went all out targeting children with their families. I know [an out lesbian footballer] who plays for [a team in the United States] and we talked quite a lot about it, and she was like well, it makes no sense targeting these kids who, like, when something else comes up on a Saturday night, their parents are going to that instead. There's this huge queer fanbase, and certainly like with the World Cup I had all my lesbian friends over, it was like, let's have a World Cup party! It's true. I think it's interesting, there's a huge queer fanbase that the leagues didn't tap into. I think they actively said... we're not looking at that as a target market. It's like, well, queer women have disposable income, we like doing things as a group... not wanting to stereotype myself, but we do, so I think that was a piece they missed out on, definitely.

She was also very clear that encouraging more players to be open about their sexuality and to use that in their promotional material would attract more young women to the game, and she argued that higher-profile role models in general would encourage girls to both play and watch football, understanding it as an acceptable pastime for girls and women. She added:

I think there's a lot of pressure ... the women are expected to be ambassadors for young girls and for the sport. There's no pressure on the men, all little boys in the UK are kicking a football around from a really young age, whereas for girls it takes that much more encouragement, I think, because of all the barriers in play, and so I [*interruption*] I think that's really important, I think there is a role to be played there in terms of inspiring girls to go on and be the next England players, but certainly there's a fairly substantial queer-identified, lesbian-identified soccer fans, football fans in the UK, they just aren't being tapped into. Certainly when I bump into Bristol Academy games, I look around, and it's like kids and lesbians. I think there's a large LGBT fanbase, a lesbian and queer women fanbase, and I think it's gone untapped at this point. I think we need to do better.

The discussion around this kind of social/political identity is fascinating. As Annie points out, the marketing of women's football in recent years has tended to gloss over any LGBT identification, focusing instead on young girls and their families.¹ Women's football has historically often been identified with LGBT women; as Bell (2012: 352) describes it, women playing football has been perceived as "tomboyish" and thus "deviant and unnatural", and Cox and Thompson (2001: 7) argue that typically female footballers are simply assumed to be lesbian, and that participating in the sport is an indicator of their sexual identity.

Annie suggests here that there is almost a fear around this queerness, and a concern to present women's football as "normal" and "feminine" rather than anything non-heterosexual. This fear was reflected in the threats to women considering sporting participation in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, warning them of possible masculinised features such as deeper voices and facial hair (see Griffin, 1992) should they take on the male role as athletic competitor. Hall points to a post-World War Two development of public discourse, emphasising the female and feminine qualities of beauty and grace, and subtly shifting female athletes towards competition in sports that would allow demonstration of these apparent values, such as skating, swimming or gymnastics (Hall, 2003: 33). (Indeed, these threats around gender identity continue even in the

21st century, with a representative of the International Ski Federation suggesting in 2005 that the sport “seems not to be appropriate for ladies from a medical point of view”).²

Fascinatingly, Griffin (1992: 257) also suggests that the huge preponderance of male coaches in women’s sport is a knock-on effect of this fear (the time span since she was writing has shown little evidence of change; only eight teams at the 2015 Women’s World Cup had a woman coaching them);³ having a man in charge cloaks the stereotypical “lesbian” image of a women’s sports team and instead lends it a “heterosexual persona”, and if a woman coach is appointed she is likely to employ a male assistant for the same reasons. This is potentially an explanation for the phenomenon of men finding it much easier to get jobs in the women’s game than vice versa (Lopez, 1997: 30).

Caudwell (2006) discusses grassroots women’s football clubs with these “political” attachments, primarily to feminism and reinforcing LGBT identity, and providing a “safe space” for all women to play football should they choose. Unsurprisingly, a decade later, fans of women’s football are expressing a concern that as it becomes more mainstream these political attachments are being broken in order to make it more palatable for wider consumption. Caudwell mentions the Conservative government in the 1980s attempting to regulate homosexuality through the enforcement of laws including Clause 28; though this prohibition on “promoting” homosexuality no longer exists, fans of women’s football recognise and acknowledge that the sport shies away from any explicit displays of lesbianism if at all possible. Indeed, Caudwell highlights the Women’s FA’s disgruntlement with one women’s team openly describing and presenting themselves as a “lesbian team”, suggesting that such an identification constituted the misconduct charge of “bringing the game into disrepute” (2006: 427).

It is perhaps also worth highlighting here that Caudwell’s case studies are of clubs that are identified as “lesbian” though not all their players identify as such. Nevertheless, because they are footballers and attached to this team, they are identified as lesbian by the outside world at large. Caudwell also reports on a rather shocking incident where players were physically attacked by men who were also using the playing facilities, and verbally abused with phrases including, “It’s not a woman, it’s a lesbian.” Wright and Clarke (1999: 230) parallel this in their study of women’s rugby union in which they argue that the word “lesbian” is used as an apparent attempt insult to female athletes competing in a traditionally

male game and thus challenging traditional power (Griffin, 1992: 258, calls this the employment of a “political weapon” to be used against any woman who “steps out of line”). This persistent stereotype about lesbianism in women’s football and erasure of conventional femininity (and indeed personhood) is something that Annie identifies as a concern for the governing bodies.

Intriguingly, Annie negotiates this by explicitly stating that the stereotype of a high number of lesbians in women’s football is somewhat true; she argues that many people know which players in squads identify as lesbian even if they have not stated it publicly, and that the authorities’ attempts to maximise the obvious “femininity” markers around the squads (e.g., picking more conventionally heterosexually attractive players for glossy magazine shoots; publicity around players who have taken on “traditional” domestic roles such as motherhood) simply isolates and pushes away LGBTQ fans. Annie’s entire narrative almost echoes what Williams argues when she discusses the governing bodies’ emphasis on presenting a ‘feminine-appropriate’ image of the game in order to attract girls and young women to the sport; often that means clichéd markers such as the use of the colour pink (2013: 89ff).

Annie explained:

I understand that fear around that [stereotype of lesbianism], but I also think the stereotype is somewhat borne out. If you look at our current [England] squad, there’s like a decent number of closeted, not officially out on Twitter, queer women, and I think that’s a good identification for a lot of women... They get criticism from certain fans online, the way that they femme up players, showing them as they are and expecting them to be models off the field. In the last World Cup, the Daily Mail or the Mirror or the Sun or someone, six England women to watch at the next World Cup, and it had them posing in sports bras with their hair done. This is not what I care about in the game.

As Annie observes, there is a broad awareness that there are gay players in England’s team. Casey Stoney was England captain between 2012 and 2013, and led Team GB at the London 2012 Olympics; she was replaced as captain by Steph Houghton when Mark Sampson was named as the new England manager. She came out publicly in an interview early in 2014, announcing her relationship with former teammate Megan Harris. However, Stoney and Harris made their relationship public knowledge as they embarked on fertility treatment to have twins, carried by Harris. The twins have since become regular figures at Stoney’s matches for England and her club Arsenal, wearing replica shirts with the word “Mummy”

on the back where the player's name would usually be. When England finished third at the Women's World Cup, Stoney left the pitch with her bronze medal and shouted to the TV cameras, "This is for my babies!"

It is not beyond the bounds of possibility that Stoney through her motherhood has added more "traditional femininity" to her public persona; it is slightly reminiscent of Wright and Clarke's idea (1999: 235) about the media coverage of women's rugby union, that even though the female athlete in a traditionally male sport is challenging male power in some ways, she can also take steps to reassure the onlooker that in other ways she is conventionally feminine. Stoney does not have what Wright and Clarke term "heterosexual credentials" (1999: 238) but her acceptable femininity is now established; though Stoney is not heterosexual, she has not rejected motherhood, a traditional form of heterosexual womanhood (see Griffin, 1992: 252), but has gladly embraced it. Rather than simply being stereotyped as "lesbian", becoming a parent has almost overridden that, casting her as an "acceptable" public face of the team. Indeed, she has adopted the discourse of motherhood very publicly, not just in off-the-cuff comments like that emotional medal-winning moment, but in formal media appearances. Her media profile has increased dramatically since coming out; obviously this is partially because of the growth in interest in women's football in England, but she has also appeared on mainstream television with Harris talking about their decision to have children. It may be a coincidence, but almost 18 months after her public coming out and the announcement of the imminent arrival of her children, Stoney was awarded the MBE in the 2015 Queen's Birthday Honours List. She is a fascinating figure, a former England captain and an Olympian, who has kept her private life as private as possible for as long as possible, but whose public profile and recognition has skyrocketed since the double-announcement of her lesbianism and impending motherhood.

Annie is correct to note that there are other "closeted" players; they may be out to friends and family but they have not publicly spoken about their sexuality or their relationships. Caudwell quotes one grassroots player reflecting on the 1980s and suggesting that a lesbian player then would have had to hide her sexuality from her teammates (2006: 430); this may not be the case now, but it certainly does seem that in order to create an easily packaged, broadly appealing pastime for the viewing masses, any non-heterosexuality must be glossed over. As Cooky et al. (2015: 17) observe, women's sport is very often presented in a way which emphasises

heterosexual conventional attractiveness and the athletes' family life. Wright and Clarke (1999: 241) warn of the dangers of this 'compulsory heterosexuality', arguing that what is not said is just as important as what is, and that invisibilising those players who do not identify as heterosexual reinforces what they call the 'dominant sporting script', demanding so much adherence to traditional modes and performances of femininity from female athletes in order to avoid challenging patriarchal, heterosexist societal norms. Conversely, Griffin (1992: 253) suggests that this mode of silence around non-heterosexuality can be a form of protection while women in sport attempt to gain the approval of wider society; it operates as a survival strategy, isolating women from potential hostility. She does, however, also acknowledge that this level of silence is unlikely to increase opportunities for women in sport, nor is it likely to reduce the lingering homophobia or emphasis on compulsory heterosexuality.

It is both shocking and unsurprising that so little has changed since Elkins wrote in 1978: "The implication that females who are involved in athletics are somehow less than women has caused many women athletes...to work very hard at preserving their 'femininity' by wearing 'feminine' clothes and accenting other obvious signs of heterosexuality" (23). These "obvious" signs of heterosexuality are still used by female footballers to perform acceptable femininity.

In a previous piece of research, I interviewed elite female footballers playing in the FA Women's Super League, and several commented on the type of media coverage they received, particularly during the 2012 Olympic Games, when women's football certainly had a higher profile than usual. However, they were quick to point out that it is not always the amount of media coverage that is important, it is also the type of coverage. They were also very aware that the constant expectation to perform traditional femininity was both wearing and impractical – as well as completely irrelevant to their athletic achievement; this reflects Griffin's discussion of what she calls "heterosexy" media presentation (1992: 253) and "feminine drag", focusing attention on those who best meet heterosexual standards of beauty (1992: 254). One player told me:

We are actually professional athletes; we are trying to sway towards that instead of being dolled up. Yeah, I'm girly and I do shopping or get your hair done or stuff like that, but when I play football, I play football, I'm a footballer, so I think it's just gaining people's respect that you're in a football kit, you just want to play football. It doesn't mean that you're not girly or you do other things outside of football, but I can understand it's frustrating because as players it does get a little bit frustrating.

Wright and Clarke (1999: 131), in their study of women's rugby union, emphasised why an analysis of the sport's media coverage was so important: these texts combine to create a privileged discourse, setting the terms for debate and discussion, and helping to create the prism by which others perceive the topic. The constant emphasis on the "femininity" of female footballers and the prioritisation of their heterosexuality in official narratives and media coverage reiterates and reproduces these discourses; as they are never challenged, they never change.

The pragmatist might argue that in a traditionally male-dominated sport, it is inevitable that the governing bodies would use heteronormative femininity as an element in their marketing, aiming to appeal to male football fans; after all, the old advertising maxim is that "sex sells". However, Annie (and the previous academic work) is right – there is an emphasis on this heteronormative femininity in part to hide or erase any public acknowledgement of LGBT participants in women's football. Grainey (2012: 170) assesses this effort to sideline any evidence of "lesbianism" or "non-femininity" and suggests that it simply replaces one unhelpful stereotype about women (that good athletes are lesbian) with another (that their looks are one of the most important things about them); but he agrees that often female athletes are encouraged to pose for scantily clad photo shoots with the argument that it will help to promote their sport.⁴ Sepp Blatter, president of FIFA, garnered headlines around the world in 2004 when he said that female players ought to play in more "feminine" clothes, including tighter shorts; former England international Marieanne Spacey, then the Fulham manager, responded caustically: "Ten years ago we did play in tighter shorts. Nobody paid attention then."

This mindset, emphasising female bodies as a reason to watch sport, has continued even into the 2015 tournament. Marco Aurelio Cunha, the coordinator of women's football in Brazil, was quoted as saying:

Now the women are getting more beautiful, putting on make-up. They go in the field in an elegant manner. Women's football used to copy men's football. Even the jersey model, it was more masculine. We used to dress the girls as boys. So the team lacked a spirit of elegance, femininity. Now the shorts are a bit shorter, the hair styles are more done up. It's not a woman dressed as a man
Eurosport.co.uk (2015).

Williams (2003: 150) harks back to one of Blatter's other famous sound-bites: "The future of football is feminine", and suggests that the concern over players' appearance and behaviour indicates, rather, that the future of football *must be* feminine. As Annie so rightly highlighted, a fear

(both implicit and explicit) of masculine or lesbian or genderqueer or otherwise non-conforming women continues to permeate the discourse around and media coverage of women's football. The specific media coverage received by players and teams during the 2015 Women's World Cup is the focus of the following chapter.

Notes

- 1 Indeed, as touched upon in the opening to this chapter, the possibility that men would watch women's football (for anything other than prurient reasons) is also ignored; the data discussed in this book demonstrates that this is a myth, and men and women (of all ages, and various sexual identifications) follow women's football. The author hopes that this persistent myth will finally be laid to rest.
- 2 http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1963484_1963490_1963447,00.html
- 3 See FIFA's coach profiles (<http://www.fifa.com/womensworldcup/players/coaches/index.html>) and the BBC's discussion of the global lack of female coaches (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/0/football/33323102>).
- 4 Interestingly, for a book which focuses heavily on the lack of financial remuneration on offer for female footballers, he does not draw out the fact that these sexualised photo shoots can earn the participants a significant amount of money for a few hours' work, although he does employ the post-feminist argument that if a woman chooses to pose for these images then it should be accepted and respected, ignoring the fact that this choice may not be an entirely free one.

6

Women's World Cup 2015 – The Media's Reaction

Abstract: *This chapter is a largely qualitative discussion of the media coverage of the 2015 Women's World Cup, focusing on particularly significant reports as well as respondents' perceptions of them. It also details the official viewing figures for the tournament, released by FIFA, and compares them to previous events; and reflects on respondents' memories of the media coverage of World Cups in the past.*

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The history of the media coverage of the Women's World Cup

There is some evidence suggesting that female athletes are often sexualised or demeaned in the British media (see Godoy-Pressland, 2015); however, female footballers competing in the FAWSL have also reported that they think this situation is improving (see Dunn and Welford, 2014).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the global media coverage of previous Women's World Cups has been very inconsistent. The general arc, however, has indicated a growth in coverage and public interest. Official FIFA data reported that in 2011 the four games featuring the Germany team all gained average audiences of more than 14 million, with their final three matches attracting averages of over 16 million viewers nationwide. Indeed, they also reported that an average audience of over 17 million (around a quarter of the population of Germany) watched the team's exit in the quarter-finals to Japan (FIFA.com, 2011). Interestingly, FIFA's analysis compared these figures to men's sporting events in Germany or involving Germany rather than setting them alongside viewing data for previous Women's World Cups. Their official news release pointed out: "To put these figures into context, an average German audience of 15.5 million watched the recent Klitschko v Haye World Championship boxing match in Hamburg, Germany, and an average of 14.8 million watched Germany v. Serbia at the 2010 FIFA World Cup [in] South Africa." Their director of television Niclas Ericson was quoted as saying: "These are solid figures on their own, but when you put them into context with other major sports events they emphatically underline that the FIFA Women's World Cup was an exceptionally popular spectacle for TV viewers."

The two 2011 finalists, United States and Japan, were obviously competing in a continent and a time zone far away from their own. Overall viewing figures were by necessity slightly hamstrung by the fact the matches were broadcast at inconvenient times for mass viewing. Nevertheless, FIFA still focused on the records that were broken, reporting that in the United States an average audience of over 14.1 million watched the final with most of those viewing on ESPN, ranking as "the second-highest audience for a daytime telecast in US cable history (behind the 2011 Rose Bowl)" (FIFA.com, 2011).

It is unsurprising that there were record-breaking viewing figures in Japan as their team won their first-ever Women's World Cup, with an

average audience of 10.4 million people watching the final there, rising to 15 million during the penalty shoot-out. The dramatic rise in popularity and TV viewers is evident by the fact that these figures were three times higher than the previous record for a women's football match in Japan – set by the team's own semi-final against Sweden the week before. FIFA's news release also noted that the viewing figures in Japan for the 2011 Women's World Cup final were 50 per cent higher than for the 2010 men's World Cup final – indicative, perhaps, of a feeling of patriotism as Japanese viewers supported their national team in a World Cup final from afar.

Four years previously, in China for the 2007 tournament, finalists Germany and Brazil had faced similar problems with broadcasting their matches to fans at home, but also broke similar viewing records. FIFA's news release did not give specific figures for the viewership in Brazil, merely reporting that the channel "Rede Bandeirantes reached the extraordinary rating of around 15 points, three times above the average of an entire Sunday and way beyond the channel's expectations" (FIFA.com, 2007). In Germany, the match was broadcast on national channel ZDF, and it recorded an audience of 9.05 million viewers, representing a market share of 50.5 per cent.

It is perhaps noteworthy that the viewing figures for 2003's tournament, hosted by the United States, were sidelined by FIFA's official news releases, which chose instead to focus on their online coverage. They reported prior to the final that "the [official] site has recorded more than 50 million page views since launch" adding that it had "produced approximately a half a million words of content".

As yet, the equivalent statistics regarding global viewership and breadth of media coverage have not been made available for either the 1995 or the 1999 tournaments, presumably because these figures were limited. FIFA's official news releases relating to the 1999 tournament emphasise instead the number of fans watching matches in person.

Memories of Women's World Cup media coverage

US fans and those based in the United States had the most vivid memories of key moments of previous tournaments – unsurprisingly, as they had hosted two and won two. Charlotte's earliest memory of the Women's World Cup was watching the 1999 tournament as a child. She recalled:

Our [junior] soccer team was super-in to the World Cup. I don't have specific memories of watching it, but I know I did, because I remember little budding liberal feminist Charlotte being so angry at everybody who was chastising Brandi Chastain for ripping off her shirt [after scoring the winning penalty kick]. I was just like seething about the media's treatment of women after that, and so I have specific memories of that, like throwing my local paper down, oh, why?

Other slightly older American respondents had clearer memories of the tournament's coverage and the use of players in advertising and marketing campaigns. The US team who won the 1999 World Cup in particular were cultivated into national superstars who endorsed a variety of products, not just promoted their sport. It reflects Markovits and Hellerman's argument (2003: 27) that women's football holds an extraordinary position in American public life.

Lisa noted:

The media's always such a weird thing to consider in America, because it's such a weird country that way, and I'm not sure that I've really given it a lot of thought. It does make the women out, tries to cultivate that superstar status, and what I've really enjoyed, in the '99 World Cup they had some hilarious ads about the women's team. I don't know if you noticed or remember, they had an ad with five of them at the dentist, and Mia [Hamm] came out and said she had to have her tooth filled, then Tiff Milbrett said she had to have two fillings, then Mia stands up and says then I will have two fillings, and the dentist says Mia, I've just checked your teeth, they're perfect, and Brianna Scurry stands up and says I will have two fillings, and so they all decided to get fillings. And it was hilarious but kind of what that team was about, that sort of stand up with each other, that I loved, and I've never seen anything like that again.

Heather thought that broadcasters and news outlets were attempting to use current players to promote the 2015 tournament as well. She highlighted Fox's campaign, using players across their programming as cross-promotion. She said:

I have to say, I've been really impressed with Fox, in terms of promotion. Here it's obviously US-heavy, it's all about the US team and promoting the US team, which is fine, as long as the sport's being promoted. With Fox, I think that they've done a great job with the cross-promotion prior to the tournament, so whether it's having US players appear at their coverage of the World Series in October, or appearing on the Simpsons or American Idol. They're planting the US players on these highly-watched shows and events, which

is smart, it really drums up interest through the year, and the coverage now, I think they've done a good job, the big studio in Vancouver, where they do their daily coverage there, and it's nice to know that they've made a significant investment in their coverage.

Cassie pointed out that the 1999 Women's World Cup winners were still celebrities, with some of them instantly recognisable to the public, and the same was the case with some of the current squad. She argued that this was noteworthy simply because it was such an unusual occurrence in women's sport globally – female players having a higher profile than their male equivalents. She said: "I venture to say that more Americans know Mia Hamm or Alex Morgan than they could point out Clint Dempsey in a line-up." However, she added a caveat that these high-profile female footballers were also conventionally heterosexually attractive and suitable for the covers of mainstream magazines. She explained:

Whenever I talk to my European friends, that's how I explain to them how much more of a profile women's soccer has in the States, but like let's not pretend that '99 team didn't grace the cover of *Sports Illustrated* or be poster children and dads wanted their daughters to have pictures of Mia Hamm up on the wall, because Mia Hamm also happened to be one of the 50 most beautiful people that year in *People* magazine, and you see that with Alex Morgan. Thankfully with Alex Morgan she has the skill to back it up.

The only similar usage of players and individual superstars mentioned during interviews was by Danielle, a Canadian, who commented on the use of Canada captain Christine Sinclair as an icon for the tournament, advertising products including Coca-Cola.¹ However, as Danielle also mentions here, the national broadcaster Sportsnet promoted the tournament with vignettes urging the Canada players to "do it for Christine" – play for her and win the tournament for her after the disappointments of the 2012 Olympic Games, when the team lost their semi-final in extra time against the United States.

Danielle explained:

I think that it probably from a marketing standpoint it shows that she is that recognisable, and probably since maybe Mia Hamm, who played for the American team, she's probably the most noteworthy and recognisable football player in women's world football, maybe Abby Wambach, Hope Solo because she's had so much bad press lately, but she's that quintessential role model, she works her butt off, she's really well liked, she's a Canadian girl from Burnaby BC, which isn't a big place, from a marketing point of view, she's the

perfect person to have front and centre, just that leader, have you seen the, it was the thing that Sportsnet did, Do It For Christine, that really, it goes to show how Canadians are suckers for a good story, we're hugely sentimental, whoever came up with that whole idea is really clever because everyone is talking about it.

One big talking point during the Women's World Cup was the variety of features and columns speculating on the quality of the football and whether women's sport was "worth" watching. One that triggered most discussion was a column on the *Herald Sun* website by journalist Rita Pahani, entitled, "I Couldn't Care Less about Women's Sport", in which she argued that men's sport was and always would be intrinsically better than women's. This piece was discussed by several respondents, most extensively and articulately by Cassie, who travelled to Canada as a fan of the US team, but whose day job was as a sports journalist. She was shocked that the *Herald Sun*, a major Australian newspaper, would publish such an article, and compared and contrasted it with the more equal tone of coverage of women's sport she would expect in America. She said:

Ann Coulter would be the one who'd write that in the States, and we would demonise her, and she'd be over. You wouldn't ever see that from any sort of mainstream to marginally mainstream journalist in America. Women's sport is afforded as much equal space as the market will allow, so in that way when I go overseas and I see the way and hear the way that men or the establishment discuss female athletes, it's incredibly jarring. Whether that's from the organisational perspective, from fans, or from the press, when you're one of the few women inside a male sports room and you hear some of the ways that those men describe female athletes, that gives you, that tells you everything you need to know about the lens with which the women are seen, because these are the people apparently telling everybody what these women represent and whether they're good or not at what they do. So I think that's just a global women's sport issue – it's a societal issue that just comes to bear in sport in a very distilled manner.

Cassie's analysis is fascinating, and is one with which I largely concur. The issues around attitudes to women's sport and the coverage of women's sporting events are not problems confined to sport; they reflect societies in which women and women's achievements are still treated and perceived as lesser, whether explicitly or implicitly.

This principle is reflected in the UK media's coverage of the 2015 Women's World Cup and women's football more broadly. As mentioned

in an earlier chapter, one European-based blogger who was unable to travel to the tournament reported in the questionnaire: “It wouldn’t make sense to travel there to blow hard-earned money when I can cover it from home.” Someone writing about women’s football as a labour of love, like this respondent, can perhaps be forgiven for choosing to follow the games on television rather than heading to Canada in person.

However, this was the attitude of many UK media outlets as well. The BBC and British Eurosport both broadcast the matches throughout the tournaments. However, as with many sporting events, the numbers of on-site staff were relatively limited; although high-profile presenter Jacqui Oatley fronted the BBC’s coverage, with studio pundits including former England internationals Rachel Brown-Finnis and Rachel Yankey, they were actually still in the United Kingdom. The BBC’s commentary team Jonathan Pearce and Sue Smith, who covered the England matches, were in Canada; other commentary duos were based in the United Kingdom and commentating by following a live feed of the games. Former England player Kelly Smith, who worked for US TV channel FOX during the tournament, went on record as saying that the BBC had not expected England to do well, nor, perhaps, for there to be such a demand for coverage: “The BBC didn’t really plan for them getting to the semi-final because they didn’t budget for it, so that just says how well they’ve done” (Philly.com, 2015).

The problem with this approach to coverage, obviously, is the limited perspective it offers; not just specifically on the game being watched, which is of course reliant on the cameras and angles selected by the host broadcaster, but on the tournament, the players, the organisation and the governing bodies. If reporters are not there in person, it makes it very difficult to spot news stories and to ask questions; and an over-reliance on “official” lines, particularly those issued by press officers, begins to emerge – the threat of “churnalism” identified by Nick Davies (2009) is clear.

Many news outlets, then, relied on what is kindly called “user-generated content”, particularly for their online provision – asking fans who were actually there to send in pictures, video and comment so that their journalists (back in the United Kingdom) could turn them into a story. Even the BBC was not immune to this. One respondent reported in the interview: “We’re on Twitter, and the BBC put out a thing saying if you’re going [to the Women’s World Cup], download this app and you can send us your photos, and [when we downloaded the app] we started

getting emails from them with their wishlist, can you go and find this person or that person? No, we're not doing that." Her companion added: "We embraced the BBC thing at first, sent a few shots. Because we did that, [then they asked] 'Can you do this, this and this?'" She added rather angrily: "'Can you interview [a player's relative]?' No! For a start I wouldn't know where to start. As a fan I don't think like you think."

These exchanges highlight some of the problems for the UK media in covering the tournament. The BBC obviously acknowledged the need and demand for multimedia content, especially human interest stories involving the England players and their families, but their own staffing resource simply was not able to cover everything. Instead, user-generated content would give them free material throughout the tournament should the fans who downloaded the app respond to their requests. (However, it is of course possible that other fans who downloaded the app felt similarly to these two respondents: slightly taken advantage of but also that they did not have the skills to provide the material that a professional news organisation was requesting.)

British newspapers were limited in what they could publish from the tournament because of the time difference and the awkward kick-off times in Canada (I will discuss later how I personally experienced these issues). "Holding" the issue and putting the print deadline for a newspaper back is very awkward, and only in very special circumstances does this happen. Equally awkwardly, some of England's key games took place on Saturday evening in Canada, and would usually be expected to be reported in the next morning's newspapers. However, Sunday newspapers in the United Kingdom often have a standalone staff, separate from their sister daily editions; and obviously it would be difficult for a Sunday paper to send a correspondent to cover a month-long tournament which they would be filing only once a week.

British audiences, though, were clearly keen for news from the Women's World Cup. This should not really have been a surprise. Over the past decade there has been a clear appetite for the broadcast of international tournaments involving England; for example, Bell (2012: 358) reports that the 2005 European Championship, hosted in England, was much better supported than the organisers had anticipated, and during the 2011 Women's World Cup a public outcry forced the BBC to air England's quarter-final against France on a free-to-air channel. (Bell also points out that viewing figures for women's football on free-to-air channels are consistently good; when the matches are broadcast only on

niche digital subscription channels, it is unsurprising that the viewing figures are vastly smaller.)

Questionnaire respondents who were not travelling to Canada made additional statements on how much they were looking forward to the TV coverage in the summer of 2015, with comments such as “I will be watching every moment on BBC”. The England team’s progress through the tournament obviously boosted interest and viewing figures; and the Football Association reported at the end of the tournament that the UK viewing figures for England matches had increased by 185 per cent from the previous tournaments, with a total of 14.6 million people watching their seven games during the tournament. The third-place play-off match against Germany was watched by 2.28 million viewers, slightly down from the 2.38 million people who watched the semi-final against Japan a few days before. They also announced that the overall average audience for a match was 1.6 million – 81 per cent higher than the average of 890,000 in 2013 (across three games) and 329 per cent higher than the 380,000 (also three games) from the last World Cup in 2011 (TheFA.com, 2015c).

This was reflected across the world. Women’s football fans globally welcomed the developments; one questionnaire respondent highlighted with pleasure the introduction of an official tournament sticker book, just as the men’s World Cup has. This interest in the Women’s World Cup is not a surprise even though attendances at domestic fixtures are not necessarily huge; as Hallmann’s work has previously observed, public opinion of the Women’s World Cup is higher and more favourable than women’s football generally (2012: 37).

The official FIFA news releases reported that the global viewing figures had broken records throughout the tournament; for the final, an average audience of 25.4 million fans in the United States watched their team beat Japan 5-2 live on FOX, the best viewing figures for any football match broadcast on US television, even higher than the 2014 record set during the men’s World Cup when the United States played Portugal. They also reported that the Spanish-language channel Telemundo attracted a further 1.3 million viewers in the United States – the most watched Women’s World Cup match on record for Spanish-language television in the United States. Even in Japan – where viewers might have been forgiven for switching off fairly promptly after the United States took such a quick lead – their broadcaster Fuji TV drew an average audience of 11.6 million for the game, compared to an audience of 9.8 million for the 2011 final, when Japan won the title (FIFA.com, 2015a).

As for the third-place play-off, both teams had the problem of time difference, with the match kicking off in the late evening for European audiences. Nevertheless, ARD, Germany's broadcaster, attracted an average audience of 5.4 million viewers – not record-breaking, but the highest audience of the day. An average audience of 1.6 million watched the match on BBC Three in England, the highest viewing figures for the channel during the tournament.

FIFA also pointed to the greater consumption of social media outlets, reporting that the official Facebook page had a 97 per cent increase in followers, with 97.8 million impressions during the tournament; Twitter followers @FIFAWWC increased by 67 per cent, generating 124.9 million impressions; and Instagram followers increased by 29 per cent, with over 1.3 million fans following the account by the end of the Women's World Cup.

FIFA were obviously keen to highlight the increased media consumption of their tournament, so their selection and interpretation of statistics should obviously be treated with a little caution. In addition, these quantitative data tell us little about the actual content of the coverage; hence I was keen to speak to respondents about their home nation's media coverage of the 2015 tournament and how they felt their national team was represented.

Respondents' feelings about the 2015 Women's World Cup media coverage outside England

Just as in previous tournaments and for women's football more generally, the coverage of the Women's World Cup globally was rather inconsistent. Rebecca, from Ireland, was disappointed in the media coverage in her country, saying:

Here in Ireland, you wouldn't even know that the Women's World Cup is on. There's no coverage at all. I've read online, even, FIFA put up a list of broadcasters who have the rights to show the games, and our national broadcaster has all the rights, but they haven't, they haven't shown a clip of it, and it's disappointing, we actually have an assistant referee out there, but nobody knows she's gone out there.

Ireland did not qualify for the tournament, which may be a reason why the coverage was so poor, but Rebecca was unconvinced that it would

have been better even if the team had been there, adding: “There isn’t much coverage, even that time when we were neck and neck with Germany, the next day in the paper there was probably about a side column and that was it.”²

Respondents from other countries where women’s football was more established and had a slightly higher profile reported a different experience. Charlotte, a US fan who had a background in academia, was quite analytical about the media coverage of the Women’s World Cup, admitting: “This is where I can’t quite divorce my fan self from my scholar self.” She explained:

A lot of it is about the major broadcasters in the US trying to find the disappearing audience, and so I’ve seen a lot of, the launch of NBC Sports Network, the launch of Fox Sports 1 and 2 as higher-end cable channels. They need content to fill the airwaves, so more Formula One racing, or like the big sailing competition, makes it on to US cable channels, and so US soccer, I think, is always going to have a fairly small but dedicated contingent of viewers and of course because in the US soccer fandom is so differently classed than in the rest of the world, they can be the more affluent viewers who have the higher cable channels.

It is significant that she immediately compared the coverage of the men’s team to the women’s team, emphasising that the women’s team has been traditionally much more successful but the men still got marginally better media coverage. She added:

To me it’s all industry, but there is, it’s hard because I can’t compare the coverage of the US team to the coverage of the women’s team in other countries, but compared to the men it’s close, which is good, and in small pockets there’s a lot of, among soccer fans and the social media of soccer fans that I follow, there’s little niches. During the World Cup last year everybody was like oh, it’s nice to see the guys do well, and then towards the end, well, at least we have a chance next year, right? The women are always compared to be dominant to the men, in very interesting ways, but that also really raises expectations, so I’ve been watching a lot of the international friendlies, and the Algarve Cup, and the coverage of that, it, like, the US commentators are hard on the women. One mess-up, one not-good game and they, just, they really pick them apart in the half-time and in the post-game analysis in a way that with the men’s team when they make the same mistakes – “Oh well, of course the back line fell apart, it’s the US men’s team,” whereas here it’s like, “No, Jill Ellis, man, she really has to get that back line in order because this is just embarrassing.”

Charlotte is arguing here that the women are treated as more serious athletes than their male equivalents. Her narrative indicates that the men are not saddled with any expectation of achievement and are given credit merely for trying whereas the women are expected to live up to their storied and trophy-winning past at all times as a matter of national pride (not doing so is “just embarrassing” for the onlookers).

Research on the US sports media, however, still indicates that coverage of women's teams still carries a gendered dimension, with women athletes suffering hugely. Cooky et al. report that only 3.2 per cent of sports news in the United States is devoted to women's sports; they found that none of the shows in their sample ever led their bulletin with a story about women's sport. They also observed that coverage of women's sport tended to be presented in much more matter-of-fact tones than coverage of men's sport; indeed, they specifically observed that coverage of women's sport avoided the “heartfelt lament of failures” (2015: 15) so often heard when describing men's sport. This is obviously in direct contrast to the observations made by Charlotte, but it is also noteworthy that Cooky et al. do not identify women's football (or soccer) as a major piece of the sports media puzzle; instead they focus on women's basketball as the major women's team sport. However, they did make an observation which can easily be extrapolated and extended to women's football: the tendency for coverage to focus on female athletes' “domestic” roles, particularly that of motherhood. This was certainly observed during the celebrations of the United States's World Cup win – once more veteran Christie Rampone was presented as the archetypal “soccer mom”, with her two small daughters, as was Amy Rodriguez, mother of a toddler son. (Griffin [1992] makes similar observations about media coverage of various sports, suggesting that profiles of married female athletes make mention of husbands and children in a way that the equivalent features about a man would not do. She also mentions the phenomenon of athletes returning to sport after giving birth and declaring that their sporting performance had improved; anyone who saw the coverage of Kim Clijsters winning the 2009 US Open following a break to have children, or the coverage of Jessica Ennis-Hill winning the heptathlon at the 2015 athletics world championships 13 months after the birth of her son, will recognise this discourse.)

It will be extremely interesting to see how Cooky et al. extend their longitudinal study and how the coverage of the US team's Women's World Cup win will affect their results. They do, however, close their latest paper

with an extremely significant observation: that the sports news anchors over the life of the study have largely stayed the same, demonstrating an extraordinary career longevity but also perhaps a lack of modernisation and a lack of opportunities for a more diverse reporting and presenting team to progress.

Coverage in the United Kingdom and coverage of the England team

Annie, one of the fans of the England team who was now living in the United States, followed the team now solely via social media rather than conventional mainstream media. She did not have to rely on American media reports of England matches, which were practically non-existent, but could access news directly from the teams and the players. She explained:

I think social media has been a big part of me being invested and active as a fan, I follow things on Twitter, on Facebook, there are forums that I follow where I can stay in touch with other fans, so it's easy to have those conversations, or via email... I think it's a lot easier now than it would have been even ten years ago, and so it's been really easy for me to keep up to date with what the players are doing, with what other teams are doing, I'm an England fan and I try to stay on top of what other teams are doing in different tournaments, so that has made it a lot easier and a big part of me being able to be a fan as opposed to just like reading it in the papers.

Annie's use of the internet to stay up to date with her teams is unsurprising, and it would be equally unsurprising to hear fans based in England report similar consumption of online news sources. Because of the inconsistent broadcasting of women's football in England, the FA has become increasingly reliant on distributing news and communicating with fans via online means – the FA's official website, the FAWSL official website, the clubs' official websites and social media channels for clubs and players. Bell highlighted some years ago (2012: 361) that the FA's public relations strategy for women's football was pinned on online media, perhaps because this was the only way that regular and consistent updates could be guaranteed when mainstream broadcasters and newspapers were reluctant to offer regular, full coverage.

Mainstream media played a bigger role for England fans living in the United Kingdom. Fans of women's football in England reported on the whole that they were pleased that Women's World Cup games

were available to watch on a free-to-air channel; previous tournaments have been aired on digital channels, and many England games during qualifying rounds were not available to watch at all. Joe was typical in his response, enthusing: “Yes, it’s fantastic that so many of the games are on BBC this time. I only have Freeview, so seeing it on Eurosport isn’t available to me so it’s great that there are so many games on the BBC now.”

Rose and Sue, who followed England through the group stages of the tournament in Canada, were surprised at the reasonably low profile of the England players in the host cities at the start of the tournament; the team’s “media centre” in Moncton was the lobby of a hotel, and it was easy for fans to talk to them. However, they also noted the lack of journalists there with the team, which they contrasted with the huge numbers of media following the men’s national team.

Rose commented:

When they [the England team] got to the first game, we realised that we were in the hotel opposite their hotel, so we can see their every move, what time the coach outside, we can see them getting on and off the coach, we’re not stalking them, we were leaving for the game and we didn’t know what time they were leaving, it was coincidence, wasn’t it, that we were setting off as they were walking out. There was us two, and the man I mentioned before, Paul, and that was it. Is there nobody here from the English media taking photographs? You see it with the England men’s team all the time, don’t you?... It’s a bit embarrassing but when you’ve only got your experiences of the men’s game to compare it to, that’s probably why it’s completely different and it feels different. An England men’s World Cup, you’d get nowhere near, they’d be taken off to a massive hotel with security and you just wouldn’t get anywhere near them ... At the end of the day, they play the same game, they’re representing England and it’s a World Cup, and I think give it as much publicity and backing, but I don’t know what it’s been like at home, to be honest, I know they’re showing the games on BBC, aren’t they, but are they showing all the games, like in the men’s World Cup?

Rose and Sue, obviously, were in Canada for most of the tournament so did not experience the media coverage in England, but their discussion during interview was fascinating as they reached a conclusion that it was not necessarily the media’s responsibility to promote the tournament and the game, but it should be the duty of the existing fans of the game; it was almost reminiscent of Annie’s discussion of the advocacy angle of women supporting women, and Sara and Lina, in an earlier chapter,

talking about their volunteering at major sporting events and explaining, you can't complain that nothing happens if you don't do it." Rose said:

At least we've got our own women's football programme now [she was referring to the BBC's Women's Football Show], on the telly, they [the BBC] are trying to get it more in the public eye. It's about people like us promoting it. I had a bit of a Twitter, not argument, but conversation with a friend from work and he put on this random comment about how dire it was, so it's just about sticking up for us, really. You might think it's dire; it's a different game, you've got to get your head round that, but it's down to us to promote it, really, and encourage people.

The very personal engagement of fans with women's football is clear to see.

Notes

- 1 It is interesting that Sinclair has had nearly a decade and a half in the spotlight in the run-up to this Women's World Cup where she was a figurehead for the entire tournament; M Ann Hall singles her out as the star of Canada's Under-19 team who finished as runners-up in the 2002 FIFA Under-19 tournament (2003: 30).
- 2 Grainey (2012: 195ff) explains Ireland women's team's problem as a clash with Gaelic football, a traditionally popular sport for women.

7

Conclusions: Going Forward

Abstract: *This concluding chapter draws together three major strands discussed during the book – the on-pitch success of the England team; the reaction of the UK media (and, again, whether the governing body’s long-term strategy has paid off by securing more and better media coverage for elite female footballers); and the beginning of the development of knowledge about fans of women’s football. It is largely a personal reflection on the growth of women’s football and the experience of the 2015 Women’s World Cup, and my hopes for the direction of this body of research.*

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The fans of the Women's World Cup

As this book has shown from the off, the research showcased in this book is only a very tiny, self-selecting snapshot of the fans who followed the Women's World Cup in 2015; it has focused primarily on England fans, with additional interviews with those following the United States, Canada and Australia, employing that data for colour and for contrast. Nevertheless, it is a good starting point for the necessary research into fans of women's football. Respondents from all over the world have highlighted the problems the game has faced in their country, from lack of funding to lack of media coverage, but also have spoken at length about the great memories and rewarding experiences they have gained from their fandom. Women's football plays a key role in the formation and presentation of individuals' identity, with some explicitly defining their fandom as a feminist choice and others defining it as a fandom common in their own LGBTQ communities.

Few of the England fans in Canada had travelled to watch the team's matches previously, either at home or abroad; the US fans had revelled in their country hosting two previous Women's World Cups and had a firmly held tradition of following their national team. This may of course also indicate that a successful team can consistently attract more fans to a stadium than a less successful one; but I argue that it correlates to perhaps the most fascinating finding from my own perspective: the contrast between respondents in the United Kingdom and in the North Americas on the reasons they began following women's football. As Williams (2003: 71) rightly notes, there is no such thing as a single cultural reality that can be identified as "women's football", and nor is there such a thing as a single fan experience for those who follow the game. The female respondents in the North Americas became fans after experiencing the game as players when small children; but male and female respondents in the United Kingdom became fans mostly as adults, switching to women's football almost as a sanctuary from the flaws of the men's game. Women's football in the North Americas has a legitimacy that it simply does not have in the United Kingdom; it is a sporting option for all children, and its profile is reasonably high. In the United Kingdom it remains a niche sport, which girls of previous generations have not been encouraged to pursue, and thus they have been unaware of the women's football pyramid of leagues which, with and without FA support, have been operating for decades. Therefore

they have not known about it in order to support it – either as a participant or as a fan.

Governing bodies and lobbying groups have often spoken about the need for female “role models” in football; but although I concur that this is important, I would argue that this is not just so that future elite talent can be identified and developed, ensuring the success of the national team; nor is it only important because the standards of women’s football from grassroots upwards need to be improved, year on year, just as has happened in men’s football. Visible female role models in football can have a much broader impact than that; female footballers, female coaches, female doctors, female physios and female journalists show girls that the sport is indeed a space for women. Until that happens, men’s football will continue to be the overwhelming, overriding default in the United Kingdom, and women’s football will continue to be defined merely in opposition to it – almost as a last resort for those who can no longer recognise the sport they love in the bloated excesses of professional men’s football.

My Women’s World Cup

The 2015 Women’s World Cup was marvellous in many ways. For me personally, it was a wonderful experience to be in Canada, to speak to fans, to report on games, and immerse myself in this unique mega-event football culture, with its benefits and its flaws, both of which I have discussed in this book.¹

Some of the points made by my respondents, particularly with regard to the more low-key approach taken to the tournament by its Canadian hosts in comparison to the last edition in Germany, were opinions I agreed with personally; the entire event felt much smaller than the exuberant celebration of women’s football I had experienced four years before when covering the group stages of the tournament for a national newspaper. Conversely and contrarily, it also felt much more commercial; the sponsors’ logos seemed much more prominent, for starters, and on a personal note it rather took me aback to be given a media handbook by the tournament organisers in which I learnt that food and drink would not be provided in the media centre (as happened in Germany and at most professional sports fixtures), and packed lunches could not be

brought in by journalists on match days (effectively forcing journalists to buy food from the concession stalls in the stadium).

Then both personally and professionally it was very special to find friends, colleagues and acquaintances – some of whom had never expressed interest in any sport before, let alone women's football specifically – asking me about the tournament. Sometimes it was a cursory interest in my research and my journalism; but more often than not they would have seen a goal – Lucy Bronze's magnificent strike against Norway certainly piqued the interest of many people based in England, who saw it replayed again and again on news bulletins – or watched a match, and found themselves following the Women's World Cup much more closely than they ever expected.

I found myself hugely conflicted when friends and family complained about the media coverage the tournament was getting; they felt that England's achievements deserved more, particularly in terms of column inches in the newspapers. As a fan, my instinct was to agree; as an academic, my instinct was to analyse; as a journalist, my instinct was to point to the pressures of print deadlines when matches were happening on another continent at awkward times for those working on newspapers back in the United Kingdom.

However, it was particularly interesting to note that not even the post-midnight kick-off times daunted the tournament fans back in England. Previous chapters have highlighted the relatively large viewing figures the UK broadcasts attracted, but my own experience supports this data. 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. The pride in the team was palpable in these comments – a far cry from some of the words expressing disappointment in the displays of men's teams in recent years.

This excitement around women's football was apparently replicated around the United Kingdom; indeed, during the third-place play-off, the website for the FAWSL crashed: such was the amount of traffic heading to find out about fixtures and tickets.² 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. The England team were clearly part of public consciousness.

It was puzzling, then, that there was no public reception planned for the England team. Some might suggest that the governing bodies had not expected England to do quite so well in the tournament, hence the lack of planning around a welcome-home event, and indeed the players' return to domestic action just six days after they landed back at Heathrow. Still, it was easy to perceive this neglect as an unintentional slight; after all, when Bobby Robson's England men finished fourth in the World Cup back in 1990, they were met in Luton with an open-top bus tour. Mark Sampson's England women finished third and were met at Heathrow by some fans, some media and little else in terms of official public recognition (although they were invited to an audience with Prime Minister David Cameron and FA president the Duke of Cambridge).

They did, however, receive a tweet from the official England account announcing their return, which read: "Our Lionesses go back to being mothers, partners and daughters today, but they have taken on another title – heroes." This message was quickly deleted after an outcry, but the fact that it was written at all shows some of the problems women's football will continue to face: the assumption that their family roles will always take precedence over their sporting achievements and their successful careers. The communications officer who wrote it argued that was not what he meant, and that he would write something similar for a men's team, responding on his personal Twitter account: "The piece is intended to sum up a nice moment when players are reunited with their families." Nevertheless, the connotations of such words are very different when applied to male athletes than to female athletes; as I have discussed in this book, placing female athletes in their familial roles is almost a reassurance, showing that they are still "feminine" and within a traditional patriarchal context.

Meanwhile, the FA (rather bewilderingly) claimed the quote had been taken out of context, which did nothing to calm some of the angry responses they received. This was a typical reply: "The only time you'd remark on a male footballer being "someone's brother, someone's son" is if someone MURDERED him."³ That might, perhaps, be an exaggeration, but there is a grain of truth in it. The FA's original tweet placed the England players very firmly back in their familial context, existing only in relation to their function with other people. Even the obviously careful choice of the word "partners" rather than "wives" does not ameliorate this; it might avoid the issue that not all the players are in heterosexual marriages, but it remains a reassurance that these women are not

“threatening”; they are not outside the domestic “norm”. It is reminiscent of the words of a journalist reporting on Cooky et al.’s study on the lack of coverage of women’s sport in the US media: “Instead of female athletes being framed as sexual objects, they are now predominantly idealized for their ability to juggle athletics with roles as mothers or girlfriends—the socially suitable, fundamental roles for women in relation to men.”⁴

The author’s clarification that he meant it to describe the players being reunited with their families, meanwhile, gave rise to even more questions. The players did not stop being part of their respective family units while they were in Canada; but very few of them were able to see their families while they were away. The FA did not pay for families to travel with the squad; some relatives funded their own trips (e.g., midfielder Katie Chapman was surprised by the arrival of her husband and three children on her birthday while the squad was based on the east coast; defender Lucy Bronze was joined by her family at the quarter-final stage, and her mother gave several media interviews about needing to find the money to book the trip online). Nevertheless, the England players were not returning solely to domesticity or family life, as the initial tweet apparently evoked; they were simply about to continue their careers as professional footballers.

As always, there was an undercurrent of “macho” media coverage in the United Kingdom focusing on the players’ conventional attractiveness. Just as Arsenal’s Leah Williamson had to deal with obscene and crude propositions after she won the PFA Young Player of the Year Award in early 2015 (and Chelsea’s Ji So Yun was targeted with sexist, homophobic abuse⁵), Chelsea and England’s Claire Rafferty found herself coping with a similar problem after lads’ magazine *ZOO* named her in their now, sadly, traditional “hot 100” list – a ranking of the celebrity women they assess to be most sexually attractive. Once more, a woman’s achievement was undercut by men judging whether or not they would want to have sex with her.

The largely positive media coverage in the United Kingdom during the tournament was interspersed with a growing trend of features from male columnists either dismissing women’s football entirely (the veteran journalist Brian Glanville, whose opposition to and dislike of the women’s game has been documented over decades, was one of these, who wrote in *World Soccer* that “it should be played behind closed doors by consenting adults”⁶) or praising the play on show but ensuring that a baseline was set down expressing the fact that men’s football and men’s sport in general

would always simply be “better” (examples of this were wheeled out by the *Daily Mail*'s Oliver Holt⁷ and the *Daily Mirror*'s Brian Reade⁸). Other comments on social media indicated that some men were enjoying the Women's World Cup simply because they did not care about the results; unlike men's international football, where they were heavily invested in the tribalist, nationalist nature of the game, they enjoyed the women's tournament for what it was. This may seem like a positive observation, and indeed perhaps it was; but it is also very possible to interpret it as dismissive, that women's sport is somehow less important and less “real” than the men's equivalents.

This interpretation is supported by some of the reaction to the Women's World Cup final, in which the United States's Carli Lloyd scored a hat-trick. I saw an instant, angry reaction to tweets that suggested that Lloyd joined England's Geoff Hurst as the only two players to ever score three goals in a World Cup final; the argument was that Lloyd's achievement was not equivalent to Hurst's, because she is a woman scoring goals against women. Apparently hat-tricks are not hat-tricks and World Cup finals are not World Cup finals when they involve women.

Interestingly, although the United States has historically been positioned as a country where women's football is accepted and encouraged, their World Cup-winning squad also faced multiple problems when it came to media coverage. Though much of the mainstream media celebrated their achievement, there was some resistance; *Sports Illustrated* recognised the World Cup win by publishing an issue with multiple alternate covers – one for each of the players, the coach and the squad as a whole – and some readers complained on social media that more important men's sport stories were thus invisibilised (such as the NBA draft picks).

There was also consternation when it came to public recognition of the United States's World Cup win; a ticker-tape parade through New York was arranged, a unique celebration for a women's team. However, in addition to the US team's float, men's domestic teams also joined the parade. Many fans were outraged that men were piggybacking on women's sporting achievement to raise their own profiles; others expressed the view that fans of women's sport needed to accept men's presence in the parade because the governing bodies of US “soccer”, and those paying for the parade, received most of their income from the men's game. Once again women's sporting achievement was undercut as the world champions were forced to share the limelight with men.

Indeed, when the World Cup winners (and runners-up and bronze medallists) received their awards on the pitch, it was very strange to see the medals brought on to the podium by a troupe of glamorous female models, who handed them on to the dignitaries. Even in an arena where women's athletic achievement was the focus, decorative women were also present – almost as if it were necessary to remind women that no matter what they do, they will also still be judged by patriarchal beauty standards.

Return to FAWSL action

As England's Lionesses returned to domestic action just a few days after they landed back at Heathrow from their Canada sojourn, I was inundated with questions from friends asking when they would be able to watch a women's football match again, and where their local teams were. A Southampton-supporting friend of mine asked if there was a women's team near him and was utterly gobsmacked when I told him about the glorious history of women's football in that particular city. He had no idea about Southampton Saints or their predecessors Red Star Southampton, or players such as Sue Lopez or Vanessa Raynbird, and wondered how he had never heard of their achievements. It is perhaps not surprising that even a keen fan of men's football would have missed the parallel history of a women's team bearing in mind the relatively short history of the FA taking over the game's governance – and the fact that men's clubs have linked up with and then dropped women's teams depending on their financial situation (Southampton are not the only men's team to do this). As Caudwell (2006: 434) points out, when women's teams are run alongside men's teams there needs to be a careful watch kept on it, because the men's teams will inevitably take up most of the money and most of the attention – from grassroots upwards.

Keen to capitalise on the media moment, each Lioness was welcomed back to the WSL with a pre-match presentation of a bouquet of flowers, regardless of whether her match was at home or away. All the WSL attendance records were broken, with Manchester City claiming the new highest attendance with 2,102 through the turnstiles there for their game against Birmingham City.

It was perhaps ironically inevitable that the broadcasters missed out on the spike in interest over that first weekend – rights holders BT Sport

had to cancel their first highlights show after the mid-season break due to apparent technical difficulties, although it was aired later in the week. Some expressed the opinion that the expressions of disappointment directed at BT Sport were unjustified because some technical problems are insurmountable; but for a comparison, were Match of the Day, the highlights show for the men's Premier League, to be postponed for such a bland reason as "technical difficulties", there would be uproar. (Again, however, this is not a problem unique to England or the United Kingdom. Fans in the United States expressed their dismay about the poor coverage of NWSL available to them via the internet when the competition resumed after the World Cup, complaining that streams failed to load for some viewers.⁹)

However, it was interesting to see the *Football League Paper*, a weekly publication focused on men's football, announce in August 2015 that it would dedicate eight pages of coverage to the women's game in future. This kind of regular print coverage, dealing with the women's game alongside the men's, is essential to carve out a niche for women's football in the mainstream mediascape. Their first major event was the Women's FA Cup Final, on 1 August 2015, contested between Chelsea and Notts County; but perhaps unsurprisingly the England players took centre stage in most of the previews. England manager Mark Sampson also played a central role in the promotion of the match, having described it at the end of the World Cup as an opportunity to celebrate his team's achievements.

Sampson has repeatedly declared how keen he is to promote women's football in England, and his national team have been a key vehicle for doing that. In his press conference after the third-place play-off, he commented: "All the girls have got more followers on Twitter, more likes on Facebook...that'll do. We've made a huge statement." His observation is correct, but some have expressed a concern that the prioritising of the 23 individuals constituting that England squad is to the detriment of the rest of the women's game: not just the other WSL1 players, but particularly the WSL2 teams, who are having to fight harder than ever for any semblance of media coverage since the departure of their only England player Fran Kirby from Reading to Chelsea. Not only that, but the Women's Premier League, previously the top flight of women's football before the institution of the WSL, has struggled for attention. It runs on a winter season, parallel with the men's game, and the clubs take part in the FA Cup alongside the WSL teams. Their season began almost

in parallel with the men's season and shortly after the FA Women's Cup final at Wembley, and they found themselves thoroughly overshadowed.

These issues around creating new and compelling media narratives across the breadth of the women's game do need to be considered. The Premier League may soak up the bulk of the interest for men's football in England, but attention is not so heavily focused on a handful of players as it is in women's football, and there is also mainstream media coverage of the lower men's divisions on a smaller scale rather than the practical invisibility of WSL2 and the Women's Premier League. It may be that the WSL2 and WPL clubs need additional support from the governing body to ensure they are dealing with their communications effectively and that there is awareness of the women's football pyramid. After all, these teams currently lower down the chain may be in the WSL1 within a few years.

Some things never change ...

Although it seems this is a great opportunity for women's football to grab a share of the spotlight (and the cash that is swilling about in the sport in England), perhaps it is unsurprising that I conclude this chapter and this book on a note of caution. The failure of London 2012 to establish a real Olympic legacy has been much discussed in the popular press; Team GB's women's football squad garnered much publicity then which failed to pay any further dividends in the following three years. Before that, there was a spark of interest in the England team when they reached the European Championship final in 2009, but after their defeat they slid off the news agenda and radar again. This must not be allowed to happen again.

As those women who play football establish their profile, though, it must also be noted that they (and other women who work in the sport) continue to face sexism and misogyny on a daily basis – and often there is little that is done about it. Shortly after the Women's World Cup ended, the FA announced they would be taking no further action on texts sent between then Cardiff manager Malky Mackay and his friend the agent Iain Moody, which contained racially offensive terms and sexually explicit phrases directed at a female colleague. Although the FA acknowledged the offensiveness and “inappropriateness” of the language used, they pointed out that they had not previously taken action against

people for their private communications, and this case would be no different (TheFA.com, 2015b).

Chelsea's new signing Fran Kirby made some off-the-pitch headlines in August 2015 when she criticised some of the messages she had read on social media, saying: "Still can't believe some of the sexist comments I still read. Why can't people respect that football is not only a man's sport[?]" She had seen some responses to the news that Millwall Lionesses' Danielle Carlton had been stretchered off with chest pains, and had been appalled that rather than expressing any sympathy, there were obscene sexual comments as well as misogynistic denigration of women's football. Yet once again even those who agreed with her argument were quick to point out that women's football would always be in the shadow of the men's game (she received replies such as: "i agree with everything you say but unfortunately womens football will never be as big as mens FACT" [*sic*]); and Kirby had to point out that she was not talking about equal status, but simple respect: "I'm just saying we should be respected like sports people not judged on by [*sic*] our gender?".

Unfortunately, judgement still permeates women's football. The FA themselves published (TheFA.com, 2015a) a rather shocking survey during the Women's World Cup which indicated that fathers with young daughters held a number of negative perceptions about the sport's suitability for girls: 22 per cent expressed the view that football is a game for men, 19 per cent felt women's football was of poor quality, 17 per cent were concerned that girls would get hurt playing football and 16 per cent even described the game as "unladylike". These views are not so far from that famous FA declaration in 1921 decrying football's unsuitability for women and the repeated assertions from various sports that women are simply physically endangered by participating.

However, 19 per cent of fathers also expressed a doubt that girls were interested in football at all. Such a declaration is surely partially a self-fulfilling prophecy; if girls are not encouraged from an early age to play or watch football, then they are less likely to do so.

It is, however, important to remember that football does not exist in a vacuum; it reflects the society around it. Sexism and misogyny continue to permeate everyday life so it is not surprising that the same prejudices are found in football; but football could be a way in which these problems could begin to be faced and combated. The Lionesses' third-place finish at the Women's World Cup could prove to be crucial, not just in encouraging new generations of participants but also in establishing new

generations of fans, whose attendance (and money) will maintain the game for decades to come.

Notes

- 1 I was at the tournament in a dual role as academic researching this book and interviewing fans and as freelance journalist reporting on matches and interviewing players. My university institution funded part of my travel and accommodation so that I could gather the data for this book; I paid for the rest, including sustenance.
- 2 <https://twitter.com/FAWSL/status/617429519662718976>
- 3 <https://twitter.com/geeharee/status/618037427635159041>
- 4 <http://qz.com/428680/there-is-less-womens-sports-coverage-on-tv-today-than-there-was-in-1989/>
- 5 Ji So Yun chose to wear a tuxedo to the awards ceremony, a traditionally male clothing choice. She deliberately stepped away from the protection offered by “feminine drag” that Griffin (1992: 254) highlights; it is, perhaps, some small consolation that she felt she was able to do so.
- 6 <http://www.worldsoccer.com/columnists/brian-glanville/an-imaginative-choice-for-rangers-plus-some-thoughts-on-the-womens-world-cup-363058#620vS3wytj6m3rIE.99>
- 7 <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sport/article-3122972/Why-trying-belittle-womens-game.html>
- 8 <http://www.mirror.co.uk/sport/football/news/brian-reade-column-womens-world-5941711>
- 9 <https://lgreensoccer20.wordpress.com/2015/07/27/streaming-issues-present-more-problems-for-growing-nwsl-fan-base/>

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