Routledge Handbook of Football Studies

John Hughson, Kevin Moore, Ramón Spaaij, Joseph Maguire

‘The Girls of the Period Playing Ball’

Publication details
https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203066430.ch4
Jean Williams
Published online on: 05 Sep 2016

How to cite: Jean Williams. 05 Sep 2016, ‘The Girls of the Period Playing Ball’ from: Routledge Handbook of Football Studies Routledge
Accessed on: 27 Jul 2023
https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203066430.ch4

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‘THE GIRLS OF THE PERIOD
PLAYING BALL’

The hidden history of women’s football,
1869–2015

Jean Williams

Introduction

In the August 1869 edition of Harper’s Bazaar, a group of fashionably dressed young women were shown kicking a football about with great verve, and holding off their opponents in pursuit of the ball (Ungar, 2015). Subtitled, ‘The Girls of the Period-Playing Ball’ this illustration suggests that ‘kick-abouts’ or ‘pick-up’ games could involve girls and women as well as men and boys at this time. However, this is a very difficult line of research to pursue in seeking to verify the evidence. Although the game has been widely considered an enthusiasm of public schoolboys and the working man (Harvey, 2005: 6), women also have a long history of engagement with football. Nevertheless, that history remains largely hidden from the popular and academic literature on the subject (Williams, 2003: 25). Just six years after gentlemen and scholars formed the Football Association (FA) in 1863 (Mason, 1980: 10), female players were sufficiently topical for readers of Harper’s Bazaar to consider their enthusiasm as entertainment. While this overview of the history of the women’s game does not claim that this is evidence of an organised match as early as 1869, the excerpt is suggestive of a rich topic that remains under-researched.

One reason that the history of women’s football has only more recently become more widely known is that the FA saw itself as regulating only male players. After a period of significant minority activity, between 1881 and 1897, when the first organised matches were recorded and women’s football grew in popularity, female matches took centre stage between 1917 and 1921. In response, the Consultative Committee of the FA passed the resolution that:

Complaints have been made as to football being played by women, the Council feel impelled to express their strong opinion that the game of football is quite unsuitable for females and ought not to be encouraged.

Complaints have also been made as to the conditions under which some of these matches have been arranged and played, and the appropriation of the receipts to other than Charitable objects. The Council are further of the opinion that an excessive proportion of receipts are absorbed in expenses and an inadequate percentage devoted
to Charitable objects. For these reasons the Council request the clubs belonging to the Association to refuse the use of their grounds for such matches.

(FA Council, 1921: 3)

The FA Council repeatedly reinforced the ban, most noticeably in 1946 (Football Association, 1946: 7). Some years later, the official historian of the FA, Geoffrey Green, was able to dismiss women players as rather irritating and as much of a blight on the game of football as gambling, commercialism and cheating.

There now remain a few subjects upon which the FA have taken a definite stand from the beginning and remained unwavering in their attitude towards them. Amongst these may be counted Women’s Football, Greyhound Racing, Betting and Rough Play.

(Green, 1953: 533)

In this, Green neatly overlooked the fact that the amateurs of the FA had quickly given over to the professionals of the Football League, formed in 1888, and football had been a highly commercialised form of spectator entertainment since this time. What does seem clear is that the ban changed football, not just the women’s game but also the men’s game too, as the gendered labour markets of the sport came to define its public face.

Though the ban did not spread to all of the national governing bodies of world football, as defined by FIFA membership (formed in 1904), it was only in 1969 that women were integrated into the existing systems of governance. This was a piecemeal and uneven process of assimilation that nevertheless, saw a whole new generation of young women begin playing football more extensively than ever before (Lopez, 1997: 42–3; Owen, 2005: 13–15). In England, the Women’s Football Association (WFA) was created in 1969, for example, providing a catalyst for collective action in what had previously been an unregulated and self-determining activity (Williams, 2003, 2007). This chronology remains open to revision and refinement however. There is also some evidence of a continuity of interest in women playing football worldwide from the first recorded games in the 1880s.

This chapter provides a historical overview of women’s football going back to 1881, before looking at some recent twenty-first-century developments; particularly in professionalisation and migration. However, it is first worth analysing the semantics that will be used. The language we use to describe female participation is, in itself problematic. ‘Football’ usually means the game as played by men and boys: ‘women’s football’ can be perceived as a variant. ‘The women’s game’ and other descriptors therefore express gender difference in ways that are both symbolic and embodied (Kunz 2010: 44–5). So-called ‘mixed’ football teams of male and female players remain one of the most controversial and contested issues in the sport. There are, though, no universal rules about mixed soccer. In England, the current rules are that those under sixteen years of age can play with male and female teammates. In the USA mixed, adult (or co-ed) soccer is far more widespread.

Nettie Honeyball, Minnie Lloyd and Florence Dixie: some early leaders of women’s football, 1881–1917

Women’s participation in football-related pastimes dates back to folk and courtly forms across a wide variety of cultures. This includes Japanese Kemari which was introduced around AD 600. Kemari was not competitive but players juggled a mari ball to keep it in the air as much as possible (Ungar, 2015). A Song Dynasty (960–1279) three-day contest in China, featured a
women’s squad composed of 153 members keeping embroidered balls in the air to the accompaniment of a musical band (Williams, 2007: 11). This is clearly an under-researched area. However, in terms of modern sport, after Football Association (FA) codification in 1863, the first organised women’s match under FA rules of which we are currently aware, took place between teams called Scotland and England, in Edinburgh in 1881 (Glasgow Herald, 9 May 1881). The English Hopewell sisters, Mabel, Maude and Minnie, were among the pioneers of women’s football. Nevertheless the Scottish players were more skilled, winning the game 3–0. This experiment lasted two seasons before evidence of the games seems to become scarce. The British Ladies Football Club, formed in London in 1895, combined the talents of middle-class Miss Nettie Honeyball as player-secretary with the non-playing president, Lady Florence Dixie. Honeyball captained the North side who played in red and Mrs Minnie Lloyd led the South in quartered blue uniforms complete with shin pads. The first game drew a crowd of 10,000 spectators. Other leading players like Mrs Graham and ‘Tommy’ of the British Ladies Football Club briefly became stars until 1897, when little is then known of their lives. We do know that they played over 100 matches all around Britain, however, with a further 20 as Mrs Graham’s Eleven (Brennan, 2007). While evidence of women’s teams in the next 20 years remains scant, the changing nature of women’s work in Britain meant that women’s football became popular to an unprecedented degree during the Great War.

The rise and fall of women’s football, 1914–51

Munitionettes football involved women playing matches in front of crowds of up to 55,000 in aid of charity between 1914 and 1921 (Brennan, 2007). The Chilwell Canaries women’s football team, for instance, were based in a munitions factory in the East Midlands city of Nottingham which accepted women workers as soon as it opened in 1915. The workers became known as ‘canary girls’ or Chilwell Canaries as the sulphur in the explosives turned their skin yellow (Ungar, 2015). The Lancashire United Transport Company based in Atherton had a female team as early as 1915 as did the women of the Preston Army Pay Corps. Lyons tearooms had several women’s football teams too, for instance.

Perhaps the most famous team though was the Dick, Kerr Ladies who began to play seriously in October 1917 based at the Strand Road tram building and light railway works in Preston, and continued to play until 1965 (Newsham, 1998). The team would play more in peacetime than during the conflict. Other work-based women’s teams included the mill workers Horrockses’ Ladies FC, and Atalanta FC, an affiliation of professional women, mainly teachers and nurses. The feminism of working-class women, combined with middle-class civic boosterism. The games raised money for charities and their local communities respected women players. Large crowds in major stadiums consistently drew media attention and raised thousands of pounds for local charities. However, as the introduction has outlined, in response to crowds of up to 53,000 at Everton in 1920 and the supposed misuse of charity funds, the English governing body banned women’s football from grounds of Association and League clubs on 5 December 1921.

However, there remains a considerable amount of work to do to understand these games. Newcastle United Ladies who played at St James’ Park in front of crowds of 35,000. Their striker, Winnie McKenna, already had 130 goals to her name for her previous club, Vaughan Ladies. The playing personnel was certainly drawn from outside the immediate area, with Frenchwoman Louise Ourry and, later, Scottish player Nancy ‘The Cannonball’ Thomson moving to Preston and working while they played. Some of the players did not work for Dick, Kerr or live in Preston at all. So what began as a works team quickly became less representative
of the company than it was competitive. It is also difficult to define the extent of payment in addition to expenses, but Lily Parr, one of the most famous Dick, Kerr players received ‘broken time’ payments of 10s. a game in her career (Williams, 2003: 25).

Lily Parr, born in 1905 as the fourth of seven children of a labourer in St Helens, Liverpool, joined the Dick, Kerr’s Ladies football team in the 1920/1 season and was an immediate success, scoring 43 goals (Williams, 2013: 32). The Dick, Kerr team were to play 828 matches: winning 758, drawing 46 and losing only 24 before they disbanded in 1965. In that time they scored more than 3,500 goals, and, of those, Lily Parr scored around 1,000. The team drew large crowds and in December 1920 a match against St Helens ladies, which Parr’s side won 4–0, attracted a crowd of 53,000 at Goodison Park. Parr was paid 10s. per week and travel expenses (around £100 in today’s money). Parr continued to play with Dick, Kerr Ladies, later renamed Preston Ladies until 1951 by which time she was the goalkeeper. After leaving the Dick, Kerr & Co. factory Parr retrained as a nurse at Whittingham mental health facility. Parr made enough from football and nursing to become the first person in her family to own her own home. She died at the age of 73 of breast cancer and is buried in St Helens near to her sister’s grave. But there are many more myths than facts that remain and we know little about her teammates or her co-competitors.

There were up to 150 women’s teams and regional league structures at the time of the ban. In the 1920/1 season a Bradford Ladies’ League had two divisions, for example. In descending order from the top of the table, the first division teams were: College Ladies; Old Hansonians; Bradford; Odsal; Undercliffe; Grange; Tartan; Shipley; Frizinghall; and Saltaire. The second division clubs were: Sion; Bowling; Cawthorns; Tetley Street; Phone Exchange; St Aidens; YWCA; Westgate; C. M. & M. Ladies; and Eastbrook (Nomad, 1921: 5). Who were the players and who formed these teams? These research questions remain.

International games became more widespread during the same period. England played an Irish 11 in Belfast over Christmas 1917 (Brennan, 2007: 37). French female football teams were also founded by 1916: the Fédération des sociétés féminines sportives de France (FSFSF) was established, and organised a national championship for teams from Marseille, Rheims, Paris and Toulouse. Alice Joséphine Marie Million, a young rower from Nantes in France, was to be an important figure for international women’s sport (Drevon, 2005: 5). Married and widowed relatively soon after, Alice Milliat worked as a translator and became president of the Femina women’s sports club in 1915. En Avant and Académia also supported a range of physical activities including football and rugby (or barette).

Visits between Femina and English teams, including Dick, Kerr’s were sustained from 1920 until well after the Second World War (Drevon, 2005: 35). Women’s football also developed in Germany and Austria after the First World War and there seems to be evidence of a game in Russia. The USA and Canada have had college-based soccer programmes for women since the early 1920s, at least, and there seems to have been evidence of female college players in Hong Kong. When the Fédération Française de Football (FFF) was founded in 1919 it refused to accept ladies’ teams as members but did not institute a ban. Two Paris-based matches were attended by 10,000 spectators in 1920, for instance. European associations therefore had a rather haphazard approach to formal or informal prohibition (Williams, 2007: 24). In 1919 Austrian Weekly Allgemeine Sport-Zeitung, based in Vienna, reported matches, and by 1925 there were debates in Sport und Sonne about the essentially masculine nature of football, as one article headline indicated, ‘Das Fussbalspiel ist Männerspiel’ (Hoffmann and Nendza, 2006: 14).

Thereafter, the German Football Association (Deutscher Fußball-Bund or DFB) regularly discouraged women from playing and banned men’s teams from forming related women’s squads. Notions of the body and permissiveness were changing and the ‘new woman’ of boxing and athletics in the Weimar Republic graced the covers of Sport und Sonne in the 1930s (Jensen,
2011: 25). In contrast, pioneers of women’s football, like 19-year-old Lotte Specht, were making the Frankfurt weekly press looking very much like they had just played a hard match. Around 40 women played for DFC Frankfurt in 1930 while 850,000 female participants took part in the nationalistic gymnastics Turnen movement, so while numerically small there is evidence of a history of female football as a European-wide activity (Hoffmann and Nendza, 2006: 24).

Although women’s football was becoming gradually more widespread, representatives of the female game were not party to the expansion of FIFA at a crucial period in the development of world governance. By 1924 all the continental European countries had joined FIFA (though the FA was to leave on more than one occasion until after the Second World War). By 1928, football became more global, when the Southern hemisphere appeared on the cover of the FIFA handbook for the first time. In an effort to establish FIFA’s independence from the International Olympic Committee and because of the success of the football tournament at the 1924 and 1928 Games (both won by Uruguay) the first World Cup was held in that country in 1930. In contrast women’s football was played but it became an itinerant activity, reliant on free space in public parks as an unregulated participant sport rather than as an entertainment spectacle, as it had been in its heyday up until 1921.

**Women’s football and changing global governance, 1951–91**

In 1951, Mr T. Cranshaw of the Nicaraguan football association wrote to the secretary of FIFA, concerned that he had seen women’s football in Costa Rica and knew of almost 20,000 female players in the USA (Eisenberg et al., 2004: 187). FIFA responded that it had no control over women’s football. In consequence, it could not rule or guide on this issue. The Manchester Corinthians team had formed in 1949 and had already played against British and French opponents (Williams, 2003: 54). Manchester Corinthians were amateurs, who became one of many unofficial ‘national’ women’s teams from the UK at the time.

From 1955 onwards Ingrid Heike and Ildiko Vaszil founded a club in spite of a West German ruling that women were not recognised by the DFB that year (Hoffmann and Nendza, 2006: 32). The club became founder members of a West German Women’s Football Association with financial support from Willi Ruppert, an Essen businessman. An international game against the Netherlands, which Germany won 2–1, took place in September 1956 and was recorded by newsreel, *Die Wochenschau*. A European championship, hosted by the International Ladies’ Football Association followed in 1957 (Eisenberg et al., 2004: 187) with teams from England, Austria, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and West Germany. Manchester Corinthians won the tournament, led by their 33-year-old captain, Doris Ashley, whose father was a high-profile referee. This was an important moment in the continuing internationalisation of women’s football after 1945.

Business and commercial sponsors increasingly moved into women’s football. By 17 May 1968 nine Italian women’s football teams had announced formation of the Federazione Italiana Calcio Femminile in Viareggio (Ambrosiana, Cagliari, Fiorentina, Genova, Lazio, Napoli, Milano, Piacenza and Roma) with Real Torino joining a year later (Williams, 2013: 37). In November 1969, another organisation, the Fédération Internationale Européenne de Football Féminine ran a ‘world cup’ tournament with the support of drinks company Martini & Rossi. In the four-team tournament in Turin, Italy, Denmark, England and France were provided with kit, equipment, all-expenses paid travel and accommodation. This was another milestone in the global awareness of the women’s game. A third Italian professional women’s league, the Federazione Femminile Italiana Giuoco Calcio, was established in Rome in 1970 with 14 teams. The resulting women’s world championship there in 1970 and another in Mexico in
1971 meant that businessmen independent of the governing bodies had begun to explore the commercial potential of female football at the elite level. This prompted FIFA to accept responsibility for all football activities or see the women’s game go its own way. The ban on women’s football was lifted at different times by national associations in the 1970s; in England in 1971 in Brazil in 1975.

FIFA’s new attitude to female players coincided in the USA with the 1972 Equal Rights Amendment of the US constitution. In the same year Title IX of the Education Amendments to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 committed to gender equity for federal-funded education programmes in the USA, and, gradually this included college sport. The correlation between the introduction of Title IX and an increase in female sport generally and football in particular is compelling. By the early 1990s well-educated women who had come through college soccer programmes were becoming aspirational role models for young girls in high school.

However, in spite of this apparent progress, problems remain today in the governance of world soccer. The Union des Associations Européennes de Football (UEFA) confederation was formed in Switzerland in 1954 and today 54 countries are presently affiliated (Turner and Idorn, 2004: 140–1). UEFA first hosted a European women’s national team competition over two seasons in 1984 to 1986 (Williams, 2013). UEFA has grown from an administrative body where three people worked full-time in 1960 to an organisation of almost 500 permanent employees functioning across multiple languages and cultures. FIFA has a similar number of permanent staff and triple that number of casualised workers and consultants when large mega events like a World Cup are being hosted. However, it was not until 2011 that Karen Espelund, a respected Norwegian player and administrator, was ‘co-opted’ onto the 17-person UEFA executive board. Lydia Nsekera, President of the Burundi Football Association, was elected onto FIFA’s 25-strong executive board in May 2012. She was joined by co-opted members Moya Dodd and Sonia Bien-Amie and it remains to be seen whether more women will follow and in what numbers. Amid a cadre of long-serving ‘blazeratti’ who decide the fate of world football, women are the polite guests of the oligarchs.

The rise of the phoenix: FIFA and the Women’s World Championship, 1991–2015

The first FIFA Women’s World Championship was held in PR China in 1991 with 12 national teams. Perhaps surprisingly, FIFA insisted that the hosting country should make no money from the occasion, but guaranteed that the national football association would not suffer a financial loss either (FIFA, 1988: 3). This effectively defined women’s football as an amateur spectacle rather than a professional mega event. There were 26 matches in total, with 5 double-headers so 21 matches were hosted in stadiums at Tianhe (4 matches, with a capacity of 30,000 spectators per match); Provincial (4 matches, capacity 15,000 per match); Panyu (4 matches, capacity 10,000 per match); Jiangmen (3 matches, capacity 10,000 per match), Nanhai (3 matches, capacity 10,000 per match); and Zhongshan (3 matches, capacity 10,000 per match). FIFA used the symbolic phoenix, indicating beauty in Chinese culture, as the key theme for the opening ceremony and the trophy. However, officials were not convinced of the public appetite for the competition, as 124,000 of the total 310,000 tickets, priced at just $1, were given away gratis. The confectionery company M&M’s, which was keen to enter the Chinese market at the time, sponsored the tournament to the tune of $500,000, leaving FIFA to find the remaining money.

As part of a continuing campaign to integrate PR China into world football, the country also hosted the 2007 Women’s World Cup (WWC) in a number of key cities. The USA has held two Los Angeles-based WWC competitions in 1999 and 2003. Sweden hosted the WWC in
1995 and an Olympic Games tournament first showcased women’s football at Atlanta in 1996. Thereafter, Sydney, Athens, Beijing and London became important milestones in the cross-cultural transfer of Olympic women’s football.

WWC, hosted by Germany in 2011 was intended as a record-breaking all-female sports tournament in Europe. When Panini stickers issued its first edition for the 2011 tournament in Germany, it was hailed by many as progress and an important first. Like the US national team goalkeeper Hope Solo appearing on the reality show Dancing with the Stars, the Panini range was considered an encouraging sign that women’s football was finally moving beyond sport into the cultural industries. WWC 2011 certainly created a new high for the number of Twitter social-networking traffic for the final at over 7,100 messages a second: more than world events like the royal wedding, the death of Osama bin Laden or the Japanese tsunami the same year (Fanning, 2011).

This live attendance was surpassed again during the 2012 Olympic Games in London, where over 660,000 people attended women’s matches. The victory of the Nadeshiko Japan national squad in the 2011 World Cup (the nickname comes from a delicate pink flower, symbolic of national female beauty) may translate to more lucrative careers, but this is not guaranteed. It is as well to remember that national associations routinely under-fund their women’s national teams. The ‘Iron Roses’ of PR China were noticeably absent from the 2011 WWC finals for the first time ever, for example.

Following the US win in 1991, Michelle Akers became an international star. By the time of the 1999 World Cup, Mia Hamm, the US national team’s number 9 player, shared the limelight with Michael Jordan in the so-called ‘consciousness industries’ of commercial sporting products and their media spin-offs as the second most important Nike-sponsored athlete (Hamm, 1999, 2004). Here was an underdog story of a child born with misshapen legs, able to achieve world fame due to her sporting dedication and off-field modesty. The 1999 World Cup Final was a record-breaking event with 93,000 spectators, worldwide TV coverage and the 20 women of the US squad were sufficiently well known to found the WUSA professional league in what was called the most competitive sports market in the world shortly after (Gregg, 1999: 12). Perhaps uniquely, Mia, Julie, Joy, Kristine, Brandi, Michelle (along with Briana, Tiffeny and Carla) rose to levels of fame with the US public which makes surnames unnecessary (Chastain, 2004: 15). However, professional leagues have proved hard to sustain and in the approach to the expanded 24 team WWC in Canada, FIFA has taken the unprecedented step of hosting the whole tournament on artificial surfaces. So subtle gender distinctions remain in how the World Cup brand is envisioned and presented as a FIFA product.

**Conclusion**

The hidden history of women’s football remains a contested topic. An assumed recent female interest in football is an invented tradition while the governing bodies of the sport continue to preserve a manly image and organisational culture by allowing women in as exceptions. At the same time, the crowded playing calendar is the most significant indicator of change. This now includes Olympic tournaments since 1996 and confederation, regional and national competitions. There are now also two FIFA youth trophies; the U-20 and U-17 WWC tournaments. Gender remains a significant organising principle. For example, the Olympic competition is more important for women than for men; for the latter it is an under-23 tournament with only four players over this age allowed in squad selections. The Olympic Games are themselves deeply problematic in their attitudes to female athletes but football has been particularly slow to change its chauvinistic culture (Smith, 2012: 34).
While the rise in the number and variety of international fixtures for women players is football’s most conspicuous move towards equity in the last 20 years, there is much continuity in the change. The FA in England took full control of women’s football as late as 1993; Scotland did not fully affiliate the Scottish Women’s Football Association until 1998. Dramatic change seemed to follow incorporation. In 2002 football overtook netball as the most popular participation sport in England, by some indicators, and there are now over 150,000 FA-affiliated female players. In both Scotland and England, we are constantly told that it is ‘the fastest growing team sport’ for females.

A recent book on female migration entitled Globalising Women’s Football: Migration and Professionalisation 1971–2011 has identified some trends relating to player migration in football’s global gendered labour markets (Williams, 2013). There were two main themes for that work. First, the growing transnational migration of female professional players into, and out of, Europe from the 1950s onwards when private business interests supported the growth in the women’s game. Second, at the end of 2008 FIFA had a larger membership (208) than the United Nations (192). UEFA currently has a much larger membership (54) than the European Union. So, in order to understand the ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors involved in female professional player migration into and out of Europe we first have to understand how the map of European football has changed since 1945.

Football was an important game and industry in Europe after 1945 because of its increasingly global reach. Robertson (1992: 18) has defined globalisation as a concept that ‘refers both to the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole’. However, still today not all national football associations affiliated to FIFA promote football for girls and women, and no national football association in the world provides equal support for its men’s and women’s national teams (not even the USA, Norway or Germany). Local circumstances, regional differences, existing patterns of connectivity, parallel industries and transnational labour markets help to shape female player experience too therefore.

This said, there has been an unprecedented level of connectivity among women active in the football industry since the 1950s (greater migration, travel, networking and digital communication). From the early 1970s a micro level of female professional opportunities developed globally (individual women moved towards lucrative labour markets, especially Italy and the USA). Coinciding with the first UEFA tournament, 1982–4, a meso level of migration was highlighted by national women’s teams becoming more integrated into football’s ‘world economy’ and ‘the global game’. By the first FIFA experiments with Women’s World Championships in the late 1990s, a macro level of migration saw more women being able to earn full-time professional and semi-professional careers from football (as players, coaches, administrators, in media, legal and corporate roles). However, the labour markets can be highly gendered. Women players tend to cluster in specific nodes based, for example, on nationality, linguistic affinity, educational opportunities and social networks (Williams, 2013: 210).

There is a gradual but widening public recognition of women who pioneered professional and semi-professional roles in football, in part due to the increasingly European-wide practice of electing key individuals to respective halls of fame. At the National Football Museum, Preston, England female inductees are Debbie Bampton; Pauline Cope; Gillian Coultard; Sue Lopez; Lily Parr; Hope Powell; Brenda Sempare; Marieanne Spacey; Karen Walker, Joan Whalley and Faye White are celebrated (National Football Museum, 2011). At the Scottish Football Museum Rose Reilly was inducted in 2007 (Scottish Football Museum, 2011). She remains the sole woman to be recognised in this way. Others, like Welsh international Karen Jones have been awarded honours, in this case the Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) for services to football as an administrator and volunteer. Sue Lopez, now a leading coach, has been awarded a similar honour (Lopez, 1997: 25).
With an estimated 30 million female players globally, of which six million are based in Europe, the evolution of football as a sport and as an industry over the last 60 years has been dramatic (FIFA Big Count, 2006). However, there are reasons to be cautious in the optimism that surrounds the growth of the women’s game (Duret, 2011). The same survey claims only a total of 21 million registered European players, male and female, compared with an educated guess of 62 million unregistered participants. It is not uncommon to include those who intend to participate in the next year, as well as those who actually do play, for example. Globally today, even by FIFA’s own enthusiastic figures, women make up 10 per cent of the total number of football players at best.

When we look at elites able to earn a living from the game, the gender disparity is amplified: if there are 60,000 professional players registered in Europe, for example, very few are women (Davies, 1996: 45). This is striking, because the idea of amateurism has, to a large degree, defined what it is to be a professional: under FIFA rules, if a player earns more for their football-playing activity than the expenses that are incurred in performing those duties, they must have a written contract and are thereby considered a professional. While those who do not meet these criteria are considered amateurs, the word professional encompasses a considerable range of activity, from the essentially casual participant supplementing their main income through football, to the multi-millionaire male players of Europe’s big five leagues in England, France, Germany, Italy and Spain.

So, the following ‘big’ question remains as a topic for further research: how many women are involved in what kinds of professionalism in world football? I await the first female president of FIFA with some anticipation. I hope that she will be an admirable woman who will appoint her colleagues on the basis of competence rather than gender and will replace the ‘little men in grey suits’ who currently run the world game. Even more, I look forward to a time when gender is one of many differences celebrated in and through the world game, to better reflect global diversity.

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