

A Game of Their Own

By Beth Heath

One of the real success stories for women in the last 100 years is the way they have made their mark in sport; and no achievement is more compelling than in football, where women have forged an extraordinary path to become part of Britain's social history.

In the years since the 2012 Olympics, women players have begun to emerge as celebrities in their own right; Lionesses like Kelly Smith, Rachel Yankey and Steph Houghton have become well known not only on the pitch but also for securing regular spots in popular media and panel shows. The following of the women's game is at its highest point in modern times and climbing.

But the surprising history about female football is that around 100 years ago, post-World War I, teams of women from factories enjoyed an international following, attracting crowds in the tens of thousands to games, even on Christmas day.

Perhaps the most famous women's team of the early twentieth century was 'the Dick, Kerr's Ladies'. According to Barbara Jacobs in her book on this first golden age for women's football, the new sport was born out of the grime and toil of the munitions factories of Britain. And yet, at the height of its popular success, the FA banned the women's game, condemning it to decades of obscurity.

"Defying poverty and wartime hardship, the women's game became instantly successful, attracting capacity crowds and contributing vast profits to help wounded soldiers and other good causes," she said. "The Dick, Kerr Ladies, made up of

Lancashire factory girls who became international media stars, were the most famous team, touring first France, then America."

One of the brightest stars of the women's game was Lily Parr; this St Helen's born lass went on to be one of the most prolific goal-scorers in English footballing history. But the success and careers of these female pioneers was to be short-lived.

Jacobs explains "Not everyone was in favour. 'The kicking is too jerky a movement for women' wrote an FA medical consultant and the FA Council themselves finally felt 'impelled to express their strong opinion that the game of football is quite unsuitable for females'. In 1921 the women's game was banned from FA grounds for more than 50 years."

Women's football was allowed again by the FA in the 1970s, but with a lot of ground to make up. Each decade since has seen slow progress; in 1972 the FA recognised the WFA as the women's governing body, in 1983 the WFA was affiliated to the FA and in 1993 the FA took control of women's football in England with the first FA women's challenge cup final being played the following year. The number of teams has grown steadily since then, but the FA's support and investment in recent years has seen an unprecedented shift in the number of girls and women involved in the game – not just players, but as coaches, support staff, club management and sports journalists.

Rachel Pavlou, currently working for the FA as National Women's Football Participation Manager, acknowledges there is still much work to do to achieve an equal footing with the men, but is clearly

optimistic about the direction of the women's game.

"The FA is very proud of how far women's and girls' football has developed, especially over the last few years," she said. "We are currently one year into our FA Women's Football Strategy, *Gameplan for Growth*, and we have made a great start in delivering our three big goals by 2020; they are to double participation, double the fan base and achieve consistent success on the world stage.

"We have been delighted by the progress of many of our new developments, especially those to offer the game to wider communities. Indeed, SSE Wildcats, our 5-11 girls' only introduction to football, is massively popular, with nearly 800 new centres starting imminently.

"However, we know we still have lots of work to do and will continue to work hard to ensure Football for all in the female game."

So women are finally reclaiming the sport they once had but was taken away from them.

Today, Nottingham and NTU have a great reputation in the women's game. Daniel Corlett, Sport Pathway Development Officer at Nottingham Trent University, has said "the quantity of female players, coaches and staff has grown hugely. This has been especially true at NTU where the Women's Football club has grown from two to four teams". He goes on to say "the next few years could be especially exciting for the club, with the calibre of players set to continue to rise". With the help of many organisations across the UK, women's football can continue to grow and encourage young people to take up the sport which should, of course, be equal for all.