

# SANDRA DORELEIJERS

## HEAD OF WOMEN'S FOOTBALL PSV, THE NETHERLANDS

– Interview by Suzanne A.E. Huurman, Spain



Sandra Doreleijers, a true Football Lady, has a lot of experience in different roles during her career in women's football. As a former Dutch National Team player in professional football in- and outside The Netherlands and Europe, being a footballer is part of her DNA. After three years in the USA, she moved to Denmark to continue her professional career back in Europe. Back in the Netherlands, she continued playing in the highest league and in parallel, she pursued a career in various leadership roles and managerial positions with a focus on youth mental health care. At the same time, she managed to successfully obtain her UEFA coaching degree. A combination which nowadays offers her the opportunity to join into the best of both worlds: Professional football player/manager and Football Director. Since 2017, Sandra is the Head of Women's football for PSV.

*"As a Football Director, I aim at getting the best out of my Team, you want to nourish leadership, you want to create an environment where people feel safe to develop themselves*

*in becoming their best version, but also to achieve working as a team. This is the same in the women's football world as in the men's football world."*

Achievement that echoes Ellis' sentiments.

*"Sport shouldn't be considered exclusive", says Ellis. "Women – talented professionals – should be in sport, period."*

And that's her passion; *"How do I make it better for those who come after?"*

### WORLD OF DIFFERENCE

Not even 10 years ago, the training practices where in the evening on a turf pitch that was only available for the women's squad if the Academy was not using it. The coaching staff group was really small and the wages for the players insignificant. Currently, the coaching staff and facilities are great and well-kept natural grass pitches are available whenever the women's teams plan to train. In 2019, PSV secured a collective labor agreement with their female players and

many major professional developments have been installed. Since then, milestones have been reached and there is now a solid environment in which the female player can have a tailored personal development support. That is the key to change and a world of difference compared to just a few years ago. It's about offering a credible platform to girls and women with the dream to become a professional footballer. In the past, players had to work and study. Nowadays, there is the possibility to play and own a combined degree in an individually tailored plan, that is the gamechanger!

### THE ROAD TO (R)EVOLUTION

You have to earn your position in football, prove yourself and become successful in order to grow and deserve eligibility towards future support. First step at PSV was creating a new team, with a new coaching staff and new players to become successful. Once the team reached its initial competitive goals, there was a momentum to ask for higher player wages, a more complementary coaching staff mix, a dedicated natural



**Image:** Players of PSV Eindhoven celebrate winning the KNVB Cup. Amstelveen, Netherlands, June 2021.

grass field, meals during the day and many other important considerations towards a professional structure.

Another very positive evolution is the grow of your organization on all domains, especially, the number of professionals, dedicated to all aspects around women's football. Furthermore, the number of sponsorship deals, development of the Academy, the quantity and quality of agents etc. The roll as Head of Women's football has grown so big in the last decade that it has become impossible to be the general manager, technical director and academy manager all at once. Additionally, there is a welcome evolution – even in the Big clubs now – to have up to two or three positions within the Executive Board for women's football. Further growth is expected with the organizational Club structure with the appointment of a technical manager, academy coordinator and scouting position. Key is to find the appropriate professionals.

**DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN**  
Although major leaps forward have



**Image:** PSV Campus. © PSV Media.

already been put in place, there is still a huge difference between men's football versus women's football. Actually, this already starts at early age where talented boys at the age of 6 for example, have the chance to enrol into an expensive

professional football Academy education. This opportunity doesn't account for the female youngsters... yet, also because the talent detection programs are not in place at that age level... yet. Nevertheless, girls do start earlier into a professional organization



Image: Otten Cup 2014.



Image: Otten Cup 2016.

when comparing with their male counterparts. For example, the second team of PSV Women became national champion in the under 19 women's competition last year. Additionally, the first team and the second team of PSV reached the semi-final of the Dutch National Cup in 2023. This is the harvesting reflection of a strong youth program vision that continues to be built and nurtured. The next step in the youth program development, is the under 13 up to under 16 programs. A combined opportunity, where the girls play with the boys "club in sync", where they get a synchronized professional education at the PSV Academy. The combination of playing with boys, and also have the opportunity to get the professional football education from an early age, is in our belief the optimal breeding ground for future successes in our female football program. The intention is to lower the age of these program every year in order to detect and develop even better players in the future. Big opportunities in which the Club need to implement a

significant investment knowing that our PSV female youth Academy is not a money-making business... yet.

SPONSORS

The spectator's interest and consequently the sponsorship revenue in female football have grown immensely over the last decade. The women's team now has exclusive sponsors, for example the main shirt-sponsor at PSV, High Tech Campus have a sole interest and dedication to the women's team only. These exclusivity contracts are being implemented more frequently nowadays, even at the youth team's level. On top of that, Equality is a big concern to watch out over. At PSV, the Management really wants women's football to be there, out of principle that matches with the Club's intrinsic societal values.

*"At the Club, it is not only about revenue in euro's but also the about the return of having a dedicated women's team and empowering societal Change for women."*

UEFA WOMEN'S CHAMPIONS LEAGUE FINAL

3 years ago, PSV and the City Hall of Eindhoven had a bid on the Champions League final in Eindhoven. UEFA had announced the final was sold out for the first time since the competition was rebranded in 2009-10. *"This is the first time we have fully sold out a Women's Champions League final,"* Nadine Kessler, UEFA managing director of women's football, said.

EUROPEAN COMPETITION

Currently, there is one European tournament for women's teams to compete against each other at the European level with a group stage that consists of only 16 teams. This could obviously be expanded to a future more mature Europa League or Conference League competition. A second European tournament is needed, where more women's teams – from Clubs that show the willingness to professionalize their female football structure- can compete against each other on the European stage. This requires decision making at the UEFA table and is clearly still a work in progress.

Based on the ideology that quality improves by playing matches at top level, PSV has been organizing The Otten Cup since 1974, a pre-season under 19 tournament, to which 8 top clubs from all over the world are invited to. The future vision is to expand this tournament next year with a parallel tournament for professional women's teams. It's necessary to play international games and compete against the highest level, it is the only way to improve.

One should not forget that PSV women exist 11 years and PSV men 110 years. In the next decade amazing things can be done, in another century it will be another world, another universe. Women's football is just



Image: PSV Campus. © PSV Media.



***The female football world is an amazing world, where so many nice things happen, people are very driven, they really want to become the best in what they do and really want to achieve something. It's really a lot of fun to work in.***



starting, things are going really quick, which is really good, but time is needed. Give women's football time, we are here to stay. It will be even better in the future. The involvement of the men's football game has been there for over a century, the women's game is just kicking off.

There has been an incredible development in the fitness of female players as well. Players are more in shape; practice frequency has gone up, strength training has become an essential part, nutrition has been professionalized, recovery strategies optimized, it is now becoming the whole package. Players are becoming so much quicker, they have more technique, their education at the tactical part is also much more developed. The top speed of the elite players is getting really close to the Club's male players' statistics, the gap is closing already. The fastest male football player in the world at the moment reached a top speed of 38km/h, where we can find this female top speed just below 35 km/h. The gap is not going to be closed, in the end male players will always be quicker due to the physical differences and VO2max capacity, nevertheless the differences are getting smaller and smaller. Yet from a medical perspective, it will be also essential to also educate, research and safeguard the particularities that women's athletic performance intrinsically entails furthermore.

#### FUTURE AND OPPORTUNITIES

There are so many opportunities, it is really just starting. At the moment it is about pioneering your way in the women's football world. Key is the conditions and the

structure around women's football that we will build all together towards the future. It is essential to work with quality people, in all the different fields. It is necessary to have good players, a squad of at least 23 players, besides it is needed to have youth teams and to build a solid program. Furthermore, it is vital to have a grass field, meal service at the club and a qualified coaching staff with UEFA PRO license. Currently, at PSV women, three staff members are equipped with the UEFA PRO qualification. In addition, a top-level medical staff is really important and can make a big difference as shown by the UEFA FRG data. Doctors, physiotherapists, nutritionists with a focus on injury prevention, evidence-based diagnoses followed by a successful and fast recovery (while minimizing the risk of reinjury) play a major role in any team's success.

Look for example at all the anterior cruciate (ACL) ligament injuries that are infiltrating the women's game. We need to know more about this and our medical experts need to guide us pro-actively in this endeavour. PSV did not have a lot injuries this season and zero ACL injuries. What can we learn from this, and for example compare our protocols to teams that have more ACL injuries? Didn't PSV play that many games in comparison to certain other teams? It is because PSV always practices on grass whenever wanted? How is our load management being controlled, is it too low or maybe too much?

Last but not least, opportunities can be found in mental health care, sports psychology. It is a new world, players are considered professionals, they get loads of attention and many agents circle around

them. How do you go about this, how can we guide the players, in still, becoming the best they can be and not being distracted by less important factors that circle around them?

*"The female football world is an amazing world, where so many nice things happen, people are very driven, they really want to become the best in what they do and really want to achieve something. It's really a lot of fun to work in."*

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