

THE RISE OF THE WOMEN'S GAME

A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

– Written by Rebecca Smith, Switzerland

I was born in Los Angeles to New Zealand parents, went to college at Duke University in the USA where I studied Economics and Spanish, and I have played football since I was 5 years old. While studying, I captained the Duke University team, as well as playing my first international match, as captain, for New Zealand in the qualifiers for the 2003 FIFA Women's World Cup. After graduating in 2003 and working in sales for a year, I decided that as a captain of a team aiming to qualify for the 2007 World Cup, I ought to try to become a professional footballer, at least until the 2007 tournament. I had to organise my own trials, but ended up with a contract at FFC Frankfurt in Germany, which then grew to an 11-year career playing for FSV Frankfurt, Sunnana SK in Sweden, Newcastle Jets in Australia and eventually VfL Wolfsburg in Germany, culminating in winning the 'treble' in 2013: the German Cup, the German Frauenbundesliga and the UEFA Women's Champions League. After the FIFA Women's World Cup in 2007, I was nominated for the FIFA Women's World Player of the Year award and won Oceania

Player of the Year in 2012 and 2013. During my career, I also completed an MBA, as well as a post-graduate degree in psychology and worked part-time in most of the countries where I played. After my playing career, I transitioned into a competitions manager role at FIFA and spent 4 years helping to organise senior and age-group Women's World Cup tournaments in Costa Rica, Canada, Papua New Guinea, Jordan, Uruguay and France. I then moved to a strategic planning role in the new Women's Football Division at FIFA, using the FIFA Women's World Cups and other elements of competitions to support the growth, commercialisation and promotion of the sport. During my time at FIFA and as a fan of the sport, I aspired to advance the mission to provide girls and women around the world with the opportunity to play football at all levels, in a safe environment. Both on and off the pitch, I have been lucky enough to personally witness the rise of women's football in the past decade.

Back in 2004, when I decided to embark on a professional career, I had to book and

pay for my own trials with four professional clubs and do my own pre-season training; I arrived in Germany without any representation. Most players were unaware of the concept of a players' union and the facilities and professionalisation were far behind the men's game.



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Image: Rebecca Smith playing for the New Zealand women's national football team.

In my first year in Frankfurt I was playing with the world's top players from the German national team, who went on to win the FIFA Women's World Cup in 2007. However, even at this level, team trainings were scheduled at different times and sites depending on pitch availabilities. We had sporadic access to a gym, physiotherapists or doctors – player health was left mostly in the hands of the players themselves, supported by the club whenever possible. The situation was similar although slightly better in Sweden, where most facilities were shared and the club's men's teams were prioritised, even if they were in lower divisions.

There were some improvements in my second year, in Sweden, where we had access to a strength and conditioning coach, had nutritional training and more regular

access to the physiotherapists, chiropractors and doctors. However, rehabilitation after a serious injury was not yet a well-organised concept. When I suffered a cartilage injury in the 2007 FIFA Women's World Cup in China and went back to my club, they did their very best to organise the required surgery, which was in Umeå, a town 2 hours away and my rehabilitation was a programme given to me by the physiotherapists at the clinic. I completed it myself in the city gym, with readjustments every 2 to 4 weeks.

On the commercial side, the marketing manager at the club was occupied full-time engaging sponsors to support the club and working day and night to keep the club afloat, but it was hard work. Even with some of the top Swedish internationals at the club, with matches between the USA and Sweden being the top quality of women's

international football in the world at the time, they struggled to get more than 1000 fans to the games.

During my career, between 2004 and 2013, very few matches were televised or even streamed anywhere. There was no platform where we, as players, could watch other women's leagues. In effect it meant that for most of the women's leagues in the world, most games would have never been seen by anyone outside the stadium. Players and clubs knew of other players and teams mostly through word of mouth, scouting trips or international tournaments.

However, despite the lack of funding and public exposure even 10 years ago, the women's game has always continued to grow – and never more quickly than in the past decade.

There have been massive improvements in terms of players' contracts, sponsorships, TV broadcast deals, attendance figures and social media following, and the pressure for federations and clubs to invest further is growing worldwide. There are more agents entering into the market to negotiate better contracts for players, and clubs are now spending on transfer fees for the first time.

Currently there are more than 30 million women and girls playing football worldwide and while 64% of FIFA's member associations were investing in women's football activities in 2016, this percentage, compared to other programmes, is extremely low, and in many cases a drop on a hot stone. A turning point in the women's game was the FIFA Women's World Cup in 2015 in Canada which was a huge success, with an increase in the number of teams from 16 to 24 outlining the expansion of the top-level teams in the world. The tournament reached in excess of 750 million broadcast viewers worldwide, making it the second-most watched FIFA tournament, after the Men's World Cup. Fox television channel in the USA recorded its biggest TV audience ever for a football match (men or women) during the semi-final, with 8.4 million viewers. Commercially, companies also recognised the rise of the women's game and, the same year, the best-selling sports video game franchise in the world, 'FIFA football', included female players for the first time. Similarly, Nike introduced the US women's soccer jerseys in men's sizes for the first time ever.

The increase in fan base and commercial support was accompanied by an increase in organisational support and for the first time, FIFA allowed tracking devices and heart rate monitors to be worn during the 2015 competition, highlighting the importance of health and science in women's football.

However, the medical and general support for female footballers around the world still has room to grow. In some countries it is still the case that if a player has an anterior cruciate ligament rupture, it effectively means that her career has ended due to a lack of proper medical care, insurance and rehabilitation. I was co-investigator for a study performed during the FIFA Women's World Cup in 2015, which revealed some interesting statistics and highlights the challenges professional women footballers still face today.

1. For the 12-month period before the World Cup survey the average number of training days per week was 5.5, resulting in 10 to 15 training hours per week. Most players played 10 to 14 national team matches, 0 to 4 international club matches, 20 to 24 domestic club matches and 5 to 9 friendly matches.
2. Even though female footballers are increasingly expected to deliver professional-level training and commitment, their salaries are still far behind their male counterparts. About 40% of players could not (20%) or only just (19%) live on their combined national team and club salaries. Forty per cent could not live on their club salary only. Ten percent of players did not receive any salary from their club or national team at all. Almost a quarter of players surveyed during the World Cup had another job outside football, working on average 20 hours per week. A further 26% were studying at university or college. FIFPro recently completed a worldwide female footballer survey which showed the average salary of professional female players is \$600 per month, while 50% are not paid at all.
3. Survey questions about club facilities for players the Women's World Cup revealed that just over 75% had access to showers and changing rooms, 72% had access to a strength training or weights room, 71% had a training pitch at the

club's location and 67% had facilities for massage and physiotherapy. Medical facilities and support were found to be more severely lacking; only 35% had facilities for rehabilitation and more than 20% of players rated their sport-specific support by the club poor or very poor. Forty per cent of players played more than 60% of their matches on artificial turf (the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup was also played on artificial turf).

4. Medical support for women footballers is still lacking: 40% of players surveyed could not access the club's physiotherapist directly whenever they needed support and almost 50% could not access a doctor directly, 12.8% had to go through the coach or manager. Eleven per cent of players surveyed in the Women's World Cup did not have a club doctor at all. Almost a quarter of all players stated that their club's physiotherapist services were very limited or not enough for all players. Fifteen per cent of players had to cover health costs either by themselves or through private insurance. Almost a quarter of all players rated the medical support offered by their club poor or very poor.
5. Chronic injuries were common. Only 4.5% of players stated that they never train or play with injuries. More than a quarter of players did so often, very often or always.
6. While 28% of players rated injury as their biggest concern over the past 4 weeks, 17% had been bothered by financial stress and another 17% by overload from the combination of work/school and football. Nearly 7% had symptoms of depression (PHQ-2) and 11.4% generalised anxiety disorder (GAD-2), in both cases the incidence was higher than in age- and gender-matched normal population. While the results are based on a small number of questions and should therefore be interpreted with caution, it does suggest further investigation may be required.

The rise of the women's game is an exciting development, but one that clearly requires further support on several levels.

Elite female footballers should, in line with their male counterparts, receive:

1. A sufficient salary that takes into consideration a fair investment ratio compared to their male counterparts.
2. Better facilities and a fair split of access to them.
3. Improved medical care.

However, any elite support has to be accompanied by grassroots investment. This fact was recognised in the FIFA Women's Football Survey in 2014, which was completed by 177 member associations. Some of the key findings were: that only 23% of member associations have dedicated staff for women's football, even though 80% had a senior women's team and 50% had female youth teams, and 78% had a national women's football league. Female representation overall is inadequate: 8% of national association executive committee members were women, while 7% of coaches and 10% of referees around the world are women. This has prompted FIFA to commit to promoting the development of women's football, pledging to support the women's game financially and to give players, coaches, referees and officials the opportunity to become actively involved in the game. While FIFA should hold themselves and stakeholders responsible for these promises, the development of women's football has to be done at all levels, led from the top by FIFA with clear directives, incentives and consequences, all the way down to club and player level.

It's certainly an exciting time for women's football, with an explosive rate of growth. I am excited to have been involved in the game thus far, and as a true fan I am looking forward to seeing where the game takes us in the future.

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