

NADIA NADIM

Young girl, war, death, refugee camp, football, determination, medicine, celebrity, nostalgia, Doha.

Interview with Nadia Nadim was not like any other. Her triumph is a story of beating all the odds of our postmodern time. A fight of a young Afghan girl in a devastating situation where football offered Nadia a chance to show what she was capable of. Today, she is a well-known football star, who played 98 matches for a country that gave her home, Denmark. If that's not impressive enough, Nadia speaks nine languages and is finishing her medical studies.

I was lucky to meet Nadia here in Aspetar, where she was treated for her knee injury.



When and how did you start playing football?

I started playing football at the age of 11, when we arrived in Denmark from Afghanistan, in the refugee camp. Next to the camp there was a football club called GUG club. In the refugee camp, we had to attend language classes from 9am to 1pm every day and after that we had free time. I came from a war-torn country where we were not allowed to do anything, not even go outside, and suddenly I had a chance to be a kid again. So, my sister and I would go out of the camp and explore, trying to find out what was happening in the surrounding area. I remember walking to the nearby bushes one day, which looked like a mini forest, where we came across the fence.

From that fence I could see the football field. I saw all those amazing football pitches. It was crowded with kids training and playing football. That was the first time I saw a girls' team playing football. I saw a girl with a ponytail. She was such a good football player that I wanted to be like her. I wanted to play that same game; it became my obsession. All the kids in the camp started playing football. We had a small pink bouncy ball and just played amongst each other. It wasn't really football; it was just everyone against each other - none of us knew what we were doing. A Couple of months later, I really wanted to know how to juggle. I continued watching the children at the nearby football field every day. I watched every training

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN:

2020-21 Won French Division 1 Féminine

2019-20 Runner-up, Division 1 Féminine

MANCHESTER CITY:

2017-18 Runner-up, Football Association Women's Super League (FA WSL)

NATIONAL TEAM:

2017 UEFA Women's Championship runner-up

2016 & 17 Denmark's 'Player of the year'

PORTLAND THORNS FC:

2017 Won National Women's Soccer League Playoffs

2016 Awarded NWSL Shield

2016 Top Goal Scorer

2019 UNESCO Champion for Girls and Women's Education

2018 Forbes' "Most Powerful Women in International Sports" list

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session they did. At the beginning, I watched them from very far away, but with time I got closer. At a certain point, when the men's team had shooting drills, we used to go and bring the balls back to them. After two or three months, I think, I went over and asked the coach. I didn't speak the language properly, I just pointed my finger and asked: "Can I train?". He accepted and said: "Yes, come!". I was surprised that he accepted, but I was so happy. That is how I started.

What happened after that?

I was watching all the players, imitating their movements. Whenever we finished training, I would continue playing for hours



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and hours. I would be outside to start training every day until late in the evening. I also watched a lot of matches on TV, especially Champions League. It was in the year 2000 and I was around 11 or 12 years old. So, it became my passion, and I was learning very quickly. One day I would juggle the ball five times and the next day I would already increase it to ten. For me that was probably the best motivation, seeing the progress right away. I am also very competitive. I hated that there was a boy who could do more juggles than me, so I would tell myself "Now I need to beat him". And I did. My next challenge was the girls on my team, as they were playing since they were much younger. My goal was to shoot better; I did not want them to be better than me. So, I would train around 6 to 8 hours every day. From there it gradually improved.

How would you explain the (recent) popularity of women's football?

Women's football is not as popular as men's football and that is just a fact. There are multiple reasons: First reason is that women started playing football very late. The second reason is, as I see it, that around the world women are still put in their boxes wherever they go - due to culture, tradition, and religion. Women have to behave in a certain way and are not allowed to do this or that. That is just how society brought up girls. So that is one thing that makes it very hard to change. Of course, in Europe and the USA people are more ahead, but sometimes some people still have that mindset. They believe that women are not supposed to play football but are supposed to be in the kitchen. I would say that these are the main challenges that female athletes are facing.

You played in the USA, England, and France. What is the main difference in their approach to women's football?

There certainly are differences. The USA is far ahead of any other country. They are the country that pays the biggest attention to women's football. 'Soccer', as they call it, women's soccer, is very popular. I used to play in Portland for 3 years. We won the league and then I went back to Europe, to Manchester City, with which I won the championship. In Portland we had 25,000 people on average watching our matches. We were treated like rock stars! People in the streets would recognise us. It was really intense. One of the reasons

is that their national team is very good, and very popular. That is also one of the reasons why they are fighting for equal pay and equal opportunity right now. In England women are also trying to get equal pay, but it is very hard, because the men's Premier League is huge, and it is very dominant. I know that they are really trying but it is not even close. When we are talking about the popularity of the game, it has been growing, but it is still not on the level that it deserves. In France, I played for Paris Saint Germain, which was an amazing experience. They have fantastic fans and they try very hard to promote women's football. The rest of the League is not on the same level, with the exception of Lyon and Bordeaux. In Europe, the biggest problem is the competition level between the clubs. Usually you have one to two clubs which have a lot of money, which means they get all the players, they have perfect facilities and everything else. If you are part of that team, you live a great life, but the rest of the league is not on the same level and that affects the level of the game and the competitions. You probably have four to five matches a year where you have real competition. While in the USA, because of their college system and because it's not about the money, the competition is much stronger. There it is more about the draft system. Every game is super-hard, and every team can beat the other. In France, the only suspense was against Lyon and maybe Bordeaux. With the rest it was about how many goals we were going to score. It was the same thing in England. We were struggling only with Chelsea and Arsenal. In Denmark, I played for the best team, and again, it was the same thing. This lack of serious team competition is the sad part of women's football. That is one of the biggest issues limiting the progress of women's football.



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Image above: Nadia Nadim celebrates after scoring her team's first goal vs Netherlands, during the Final of the UEFA Women's Euro 2017.

Image left: Nadia during the Division 1 match between PSG and Montpellier. Paris, December 2019.

Image on the next page: Nadia celebrates with her teammates after Paris Saint-Germain Women's team won the French Division 1 Féminine championship in a match against Dijon. Paris, 4 June 2021.

You are finalizing your medical studies and you were a professional football player. Is it possible for elite players to do their studies and to continue their football career, today?

Definitely, I think it is possible. You have enough time for that. I am probably one of the busiest footballers you will meet, because I have many other activities besides my studies. The last two months I have done lots of interviews. That takes so much of my time. I do like my UNESCO engagement, and still have time to study. So, for me that is not a question at all. Anything is possible if you really want it. It is about time management. And it is not because women spend less time in clubs - that is not the case at all. We are spending the same amount of time in the club, if not more. It is just about how much you want it. The reason why I chose to study is because for me it is important to use your brain, otherwise it gets boring. If I didn't do anything else during the day but just played football, that would be a sad life. What do you do when you go home after training? Play PlayStation? What is the point of it? In 2000 the Barcelona football team visited NASA's campus and got the opportunity to see the astronauts. I thought to myself "you must feel so small as a human to see that there are other humans who are doing research in outer space while you are running after a ball!". I believe that school gives you the chance to develop as a human being, to do something that impacts other people's lives as well. It is not just about having fun, because for me sport is fun, and you do it as a passion or a hobby. Of course, you get paid a lot of money but at the end you do it for yourself.

At a young age, all athletes start to play sport because they love it. Slowly it becomes their passion and then they want to reach certain goals, but it is not money that pushes you forward - the love for sports is the driving force. What do you think about this?

I think, as you have said, that passion has always been the key factor – that is how you start. When you are younger, you have nothing else to do. I used to go outside and train for hours and hours, because that would make me happy, and I constantly saw the progress. For me now, that is still the same thing. I did not play football because I got paid for it, nor because of the fame or anything else. I don't care about the money, because it can be made in a lot of other ways. I do it because it makes me happy. Nowadays you see a lot of people and you can sense that for them it is about other things and not the sport. It is sad for me to see that the purity and the passion for the sport is not the same as it used to be when we were younger. I hope that they somehow get to control it, because currently the main concern is the money. The club can buy the best players. They win the championship and then they disappear, the players go to another club because they were offered a better pay. It upsets me to see this happening, but that is our reality right now.

Mental health today became a hot topic. What is your opinion and experience?

I think mental health is a big issue. A lot of athletes are suffering from this. Two of the major causes are the pressure and high expectations. Your own expectation, as well as those of people around you,





Image: Nadia playing for IK Skovbakken in a match against Fortuna Hjørring during the 3F Cupfinale women. May 2009.

sometimes put a lot of pressure on you. Nowadays, there is a lot of pressure on the players and the managing staff. I think it depends on what kind of person you are. Personally, I am tough because of my background and because I can put things into perspective. I don't feel the pressure. There were not many situations that made me feel like I was not doing well. Of course, there has been times when I felt lonely and upset, but that's normal and it just means that I am a human being. I know a lot of players were dealing with mental problems and it is a topic that they should feel free to talk about. It shouldn't be a big deal. Lately I know that a lot of clubs are trying to help the players by always having a psychologist available. I have had some real experiences myself and I know life can be tough, but I also know it can be so much worse. I always say "this right now is bad, but I should be grateful because it could be so much worse" and I know this for a fact. This is my mindset in most situations because I know that this is the reality. I would never complain about food for example. It is all about putting things into perspective. I think big problems must be dealt with, but I know how to cope with it. So, I've never had that issue, luckily.

Is it an advantage in women's football if you have a female coach?

For me, it doesn't matter. The opportunity should go to the best person for the job. I understand the need to have more female referees and coaches. I understand this because we need to level out the playing field. But on the other hand, you also want these coaches to be competent, because you want to be the best. If you have two people to choose from, you want to pick the best one, not just the one that is female. I want it to be fair. Unfairness can go both ways: we don't want people to say: let's have this coach in the Premier League because we don't hire women'. The reason we want to have more women in the game is because right now there are not many of them, there is a huge gap, and we want it to be fair. But then you can't do the opposite by saying "hey, you're female, so let's go!". That way it becomes unfair again. So, for me, no, that is not important. I want to have the best coach, not because she is a woman or because he is a man.



Image left: Nadia Nadim playing for Manchester City Women. August 2018.

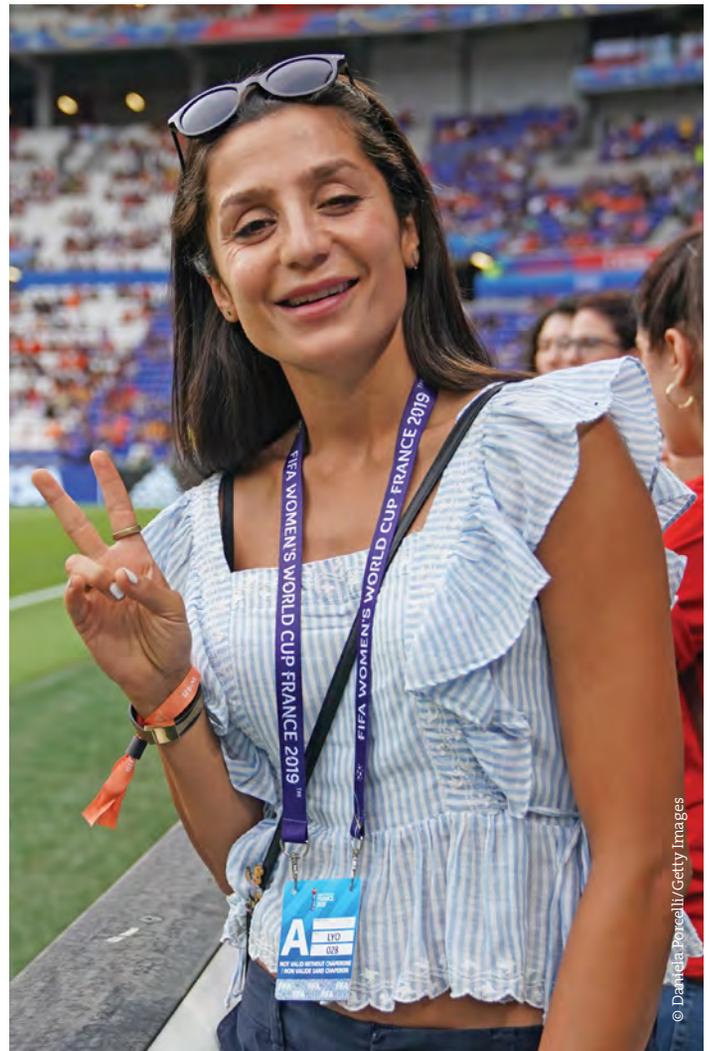


Image right: Nadia as a spectator during the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup France Semi Final match between Netherlands and Sweden. France, 3 July 2019.

Today in football, it's all about the marketing. Big companies are backing a small number of famous clubs. On the other side, there are millions of football players around the world without financial support, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. What is your opinion?

I think there should be a combined approach. You still want to improve the elite teams, because that is what pushes the game higher, so you want them to keep on going and reaching their maximum potential, but you should never forget the millions of small clubs around the world. The more you improve them, the more elite players will develop from them. It goes hand in hand. Focusing on one thing only is not the right approach. I think you have to always have the small clubs. They are like the links of a chain because one can't exist without the other. You can't have a great league player if you don't have the grassroots talent, which you are working hard to develop, and vice versa. I was talking yesterday at a FIFA meeting on how to improve their working conditions. I've always been a huge supporter of people who you don't see, because there are so many of them. You need to have access to the game, that for me is the key thing. The kind of access where every kid around

the world can play football, if they want to. That kind of opportunity is the first step.

What would be your message to young girls who are playing football?

I think it doesn't have to be only for female football players, but for anyone: it is very important to have big dreams. When I was in the refugee camp, when I saw football for the first time, my dream was to play for Real Madrid or Barcelona – for their men's team, because back then I didn't even know that Womens' teams existed. You see something and imagine it is so far away. But suddenly it happened and now I'm a professional football player. I play for the best clubs in the world. It's that dream that keeps you going. Nothing comes for free in this life. If you really want something you have to work very hard for it, you have to make it happen. You can't have a big dream without doing something about it, because then it's not realistic. So, have a big dream, work hard, and believe that is going to become a reality.

Nebojsa Popovic MD, PhD