

On women and football

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Running head: Women's soccer – historical and current

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There are various reasons why football is an excellent sport for the use in fitness interventions. First of all, most participants know the game and playing a game is fun which increases motivation and prevents drop outs. In addition, the competitive character of games has a positive influence on the intensity of the actions and the willingness to engage.

However, it is a question if boys and girls, women and men experience these influences and benefits in the same way. It could be assumed that males are more motivated to play football than girls and women.

https://www.uefa.com/MultimediaFiles/Download/OfficialDocument/uefaorg/Women'sfootball/02/51/60/57/2516057_DOWNLOAD.pdf

According to the UEFAs Sweden

To use football in a fitness intervention

Football is a game which has been and still is played in many countries, mostly by boys and men. Predecessors of soccer in Europe are the wild folk games where boys and men had to transport a ball to a distant place. They had to fight to get the ball and they could carry, throw or kick it to the goal. This wild game was “tamed” in the English public schools where boys should learn self-

control and compliance with rules. At the same time, football was adopted by boys and men of the working classes and matches attracted an increasing crowd of predominately male audiences.

Although women's football teams emerged already in the beginning of the 20s century, e.g. in England and France, it took until the 21st century that female football players gained a measure of public attention and respect. Reports provided by UEFA in ## and ## show the increasing number of female players and teams as well as the increasing support of women's football in the various countries. **Should I find information about Sweden ?**

Despite positive developments, media attention and public interest focus on the men's game. Thus it is not surprising, that boys consider football as one of their favorite sports. In contrast, girls predominately vote for horseback riding although this sport is not easy to access.

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Keywords: Women's soccer players, women's soccer teams, European countries, development and situation, media coverage

Introduction: Soccer, a men's game – the origins

Ball games existed – and still exist – in numerous time periods and in many regions and cultures.

They have been played throughout the ages, for example in South America, in Greece as well as in China, and in many European countries. Players were children and adults, men and women, rich and poor, who used games as training or entertainment, or as a means of worshipping the gods.

Kicking a ball was popular in many cultures, for instance in ancient China as well as among the Australian aborigines.

The roots of modern football were the wild folk games of the early modern age which attracted large crowds of participants, most of them boys and men, who tried to get hold of a ball and to transport it to a distant goal (Walvin, 1994). These games were ‘tamed’ in the English public schools, where middle- and upper-class boys were trained to follow rules by playing sport, in particular by playing football. The codification of rules encouraged competitions between schools and universities, but soon also between clubs, which emerged in the 1840s (Walvin, 2000). With the gradual reduction of working hours since the end of the 19th century, football began to attract male members of the working classes, not least because the game ‘embodied’ their values and their ideals of masculinity. Whereas the ‘gentlemen’ players, striving for social distinction, emphasized the values of amateurism, proletarian soccer players regarded soccer as work and became ‘professionals’ (Walvin, 2000).

After the turn of the century, soccer spread to other European countries and overseas, in particular to regions where Englishmen – sailors, soldiers or entrepreneurs – played the game and served as ‘role models’. In the course of the 20th century, men’s soccer became the most popular sport worldwide, and today millions play the game and billions of fans watch the matches. The Soccer World Cup even exceeds the Olympic Games in popularity; in 2006, the world cup had a total cumulative television audience of 26.29 billion viewers. The final match attracted an audience of 715 million.¹

But soccer is more than a sport: Soccer teams seem to represent their club, their city or their country and produce ‘sites of memory’, i.e. remembrances which mirror the aims and values of their communities. A good example of the representative function of soccer is the interpretation of the German team’s victory in the 1954 World Cup as a sign of the end of the country’s ostracism after

World War II. In postwar years soccer played its part in contributing to a return to normality and became a symbol of reconciliation. Thus, Germany's victory in 1954, dubbed by Germans the 'miracle of Bern', could be viewed as the return of the country to the world community. The increasing professionalization of the players in the 1960s and the new opportunities of consuming soccer via radio and then TV not only changed consumption habits but also contributed to the increasing importance of the game in the everyday lives of consumers and fans.

The popularity, the heroic image, and the representative function of soccer, however, were reserved for men's game. Women who played the game were considered outsiders, members of the 'weaker sex' who were trying to intrude in this male domain. The notion of women as the 'second sex', unable to cope with the physical challenges of the game, hindered or even precluded the social acceptance of women's soccer for many years (Fan & Mangan, 2004).

In this chapter I will present a short overview of the emergence of women's soccer in Europe, describe the current situation and discuss explanations for the gender hierarchy in this game. Besides informing about general trends on the continent, I will provide examples primarily using the situation in the countries with the largest number of players, Germany, and the largest percentage of female soccer players, Denmark.

Women's soccer – developments

First attempts of women to play soccer can be traced to England and Scotland in the 1880s already. Women's soccer experienced a considerable upswing during World War I, when matches of female teams drew large crowds, for instance in the UK. That women played a men's game was accepted and even welcomed because they donated the gate money for wounded soldiers. Particularly female

workers in factories, such as the 'Dick, Kerr's Ladies', loved the game because it provided a diversion from their tiresome everyday life. This team not only included some of the best players; it also survived the decline of women's soccer caused by – among other issues – the decision of the soccer federation to prohibit men's soccer clubs from supporting women's teams. Clubs were no longer allowed to make their fields available for women's matches. Female soccer players tried to solve these problems, for instance by founding a federation, but could not stop the decline of the women's soccer movement in England (Maguee, 2007; Williams, 2007).

In France, too, women's sport, including soccer, flourished after the turn of the century, and several women's sports clubs had already been founded before WW I. One of the most famous clubs was Femina, whose president in 1915, Alice Milliat, was also the president of the International Women's Sport Federation, an organization which conducted the Women's World Games. Soccer, however, was not included in the program of these events. The fierce competition between several women's teams contributed to the rise of women's soccer in the country. In 1920, a French team even travelled to England and engaged in the first international women's soccer matches with the Dick, Kerr's Ladies FC and other teams. In the same year the Ladies came to France (Pfister, Fasting, Scraton & Vázquez, 2002). One of the best all-round athletes in France and also of the best soccer players worldwide was Violette Morris, a member of Femina Sport and later Olympique de Paris. However, in 1928 she was denied a license and excluded from participation in the discus throw at the Olympic Games in 1928 because she dressed and behaved like a man. Not only in France but also in other countries playing sport was tolerated as long as the women respected the written and unwritten laws of the prevailing gender order (Michallat, 2005).

Other countries also hosted women's soccer teams, such as Belgium, the Netherlands, and Austria. In Germany, however, resistance to women's soccer was particularly strong. The following

comment printed in a women's magazine represented the general opinion in the country: "Women may be playing soccer in England and America, but it is to be hoped that this bad example is not followed in German sport" (Pfister, 2012, p. 20). This hope was fulfilled as the very few attempts of German women to play soccer were doomed to failure. An initiative of young girls in Frankfurt in 1930 failed, for example, because of the resistance of their parents (Pfister, 2012). In the increasingly conservative climate of the 1930s and 1940s traditional ideals of femininity and attitudes towards women's participation in sport prevailed not only in Germany but in many other European countries.

In the 1950s, clever businessmen organized women's soccer matches between teams from Germany and the Netherlands. They used the 'spectacle' of soccer played by women to attract crowds and to make money. Although the skill of the players and the quality of the game surprised the audiences, decreasing interest, resistance from the German soccer federation (DFB), and bad management contributed to the decline of the first women's soccer movement in the country (Pfister, 2012).

From the end of the 1960s onward women in several countries started to play soccer as a leisure activity or as a competitive sport. However, the organization of matches and tournaments called for a certain form of governance and an umbrella organization. In Denmark, female soccer players organized a league of their own and even founded a women's soccer federation as early as 1968, which later merged with the DBU (Brus & Trangbaek, 2004).

In Germany, women played soccer in the 1960s 'just for fun', but soon they demanded access to sport facilities and asked to be admitted to the DFB. The members of the president's committee were strongly opposed to this request and used medical and psychological arguments to legitimate the rejection of this application. They believed that participation in such a strenuous sport would

damage the women's health as well as their feminine appeal. However, the increasing number of female players in the country and the rise of women's soccer movements in Europe and worldwide left the German soccer authorities no choice: they eventually accepted female players, but discussed numerous extra rules for the 'weaker sex', for example the prohibition of cleated shoes and protection for the breast (Pfister, 2012). However, none of these rules were put into practice. In other European countries, too, women began to play soccer, and neither the disapproval of soccer organizations nor the alleged consequences for their health, fertility, and femininity deterred the female players. Despite the many obstacles, women's soccer came to stay. The number of female players grew slowly but continuously, at first in northern and central Europe but soon also in other European countries and on all continents. At the same time, the first national leagues and international competitions were organized. In 1991, the first 'official' FIFA World Championship took place in China; other events followed and soon filled the women's soccer calendar (Williams, 2011).

Women's soccer today

General situation

Although soccer still seems to epitomize masculinity, FIFA president Blatter claimed a 'female future' for the game as early as 1995 in a speech during the Women's World Cup in Sweden (Degun, 2013). His prophecy has come true, at least with regard to the expansion of women's soccer. The game has become the most popular female team sport in Europe, although there are decisive gender differences, in particular concerning the salary of the players.

The numbers of female players published by UEFA (UEFA, 2014; UEFA, 2015), as well as numerous reports dealing with the game's development in different countries,² provide an overview of the situation of women's soccer in Europe: Currently, more than 1.2 million girls and women are registered soccer players in the UEFA countries; in the UK, the Netherlands and Sweden their numbers exceed 100,000. Germany is the country with the largest number of female soccer players: 258,000 girls and women play in one of the 12,900 women's or girls' teams in the country (UEFA, 2015; DFB, 2015). However, if we put these numbers in relation to the total number of players, girls and women form a relatively small minority. 7% of registered players in Europe are female; in four countries – Denmark, the Faroe Islands, Iceland and Sweden – the percentage of girls and women among the players exceeds 20%. In other countries such as Turkey, Ukraine, Rumania and Poland, less than 3% of players are girls or women (UEFA, 2015). Here, it must also be taken into consideration that a relatively large number of female players are not 'registered' as they do not take part in 'official' competitions. The latest figures provided for Germany by the DFB reveal that 758,441 women and 336,464 girls under 16 years of age are members of voluntary soccer clubs, many more than the registered players mentioned above. In addition, numerous females play the game outside clubs and federations, e.g. in schools or in their leisure in parks. Thus, there may be many more female soccer players in Europe than indicated in the UEFA report (DFB, 2015).

In Europe, soccer competitions are organized by clubs and federations. Female players are mostly members of local mixed-gender soccer clubs. In some countries women's soccer clubs with teams playing in the top leagues have emerged. Other top teams are attached to men's clubs.³ In the German women's 'Bundesliga' two women's soccer clubs, Turbine Potsdam and 1. FFC Frankfurt, have dominated the women's soccer scene for many years. However, in recent years they have lost ground to teams attached to and supported by clubs with professional men's teams. In Sweden, a

women-only club in Malmö, LdB FC Malmö, fielded one of the best European teams. But this club, too, merged with a club of male and female members.

The information presented above indicates that women's soccer is still a marginal sport compared with the men's game. However, soccer is the most popular women's team sports in some European countries like Germany. Here, 140,000 young women (19-26 years of age) play soccer – more than in all other team sports together.⁴ The development during the past decade shows remarkable progress not only with regard to the numbers of players but also with regard to performance and public acceptance, indicated by the emergence of competitions and tournaments at national, regional, and international levels: Female players compete in a quadrennial World Cup and a soccer tournament at the Olympics (since 1996), as well in continental competitions, e.g. the Euro and the UEFA Women's Champion League. In most countries league systems for women teams have been established which provide the opportunity of promotion and relegation. The prevalence of women's soccer has been accompanied by a continuous increase in the player's capabilities and performances, which has also had a positive influence on the quality of the matches and – as a further consequence – on the interest of soccer supporters and fans.

In the past decade the women's top events at the international level have gained considerable media attention and were followed by large audiences. The 2013 UEFA women's championship in Sweden broke the record in ticket sales, and the last mega event, the women's WC in 2015 in Canada, was covered by the “biggest and most advanced broadcast production for a women's soccer tournament” ever (FIFA, 2015). The 52 matches had a total attendance of 1.3 million. In many countries the viewing records of women's games have been broken. The final attracted 25 million Americans and was the most watched soccer match of men and women in the USA of all time. 25.4 million Americans followed their team's triumph on TV (Pingue, 2015).

Current issues

Despite the increasing number of female soccer players, above all in northern and central European countries, several issues must be taken into consideration as they may influence the development of women's soccer, in particular at the elite level (e.g. Williams, 2011). An overview provided by UEFA gives information about the budgets for women's soccer in the member countries, which vary between less than 100,000 and 15 million euros. Thirty out of 50 federations invest less than one million euros, and only the federations in France, Sweden, Norway, England, and Germany spend between 4 and 15 million euros on women's soccer (UEFA, 2015, p.29).

The large majority of European soccer players are amateurs, but this is particularly true of women. In 22 of the 54 European soccer associations not a single professional female player is registered, and only 2,625 women play soccer professionally. However, most of them earn only a minimal salary (UEFA, 2015, p. 16).

In 2013/2014, the European Club Association (ECA) investigated 22 women's soccer teams in Europe. Special focus was placed on the budget, the salary of the players, and the number and qualification of the employees. One of the main questions was whether the teams were sufficiently supported and whether they could rely on professional staff. The results of this survey revealed that the lack of financial resources was one of the main problems in women's soccer. Only three of the clubs had a yearly budget larger than 1 million euros, but there were also three clubs which could only spend 50,000 euros or less. The players earned between 40 and 18,000 euros. However, it seems to have been the Brazilian player Marta, playing for the Swedish club Rosengård, who earned this 'exceptional' sum (maybe paid by sponsors). The average salary was 545 euros in the

clubs with a budget under 250,000 euros and 1,515 euros in the ‘richer’ clubs. 41% of the clubs had fewer than five employees, 36% between five and ten employees (ECA, n.d.). These numbers mirror the status of women in soccer: they are, at best, semi-professionals while men may earn millions.⁵

The financial situation of women’s soccer has numerous consequences for the game. Small budgets mean a small number of staff – or none at all – with the result that many teams rely on the support of volunteers for carrying out the various daily tasks. As this situation may hinder an upwards trend in women’s soccer, some of the European federations, such as the Danish Soccer Federation (DBU), have taken action. Denmark is the country with the highest percentage of registered players due to the positive attitude towards girls’ and women’s soccer in the country. In 2012, the federation decided on a ‘development plan’ for women’s elite soccer (Vision 2020) which regulates the material conditions (including human resources) which clubs must provide if they wish to host a team in the top league. ‘Poor’ clubs can ask the federation for financial support (DBU, n.d.).

Public interest in and media coverage of women’s soccer

Despite numerous positive developments in recent decades, the lack of resources in women’s soccer (as described above) is a decisive barrier impeding the professionalization of the players and, in general, the advancement of the game. Resources are generated by entrance fees to matches and, in particular, by sponsors who use soccer teams and players as endorsements for their products. Not only a team’s positive image but also – and in particular – the coverage of the media, the media consumers, and the audiences of live events (their size and their demographic characteristics) are decisive criteria for sponsors’ investments. Women’s soccer differs from the men’s game not only

in the numbers of supporters and fans but also – and in particular – in the interest the media takes in the weekly matches.

Current information on public interest in soccer is provided by the results of a representative population survey conducted in eight countries in the context of the FREE project (Football Research in an Enlarged Europe) which explored role of soccer in the lives of Europeans.⁶ 34.6% of the female respondents and 64.9% of the males reported that they were interested or very interested in soccer in general. However, there were large differences in soccer interest among the various countries: only 20.7% of the women but 71.4% of the men in Austria and 46% of German women but 64.9% of German men reported being (very) interested in the game. The country with the highest percentage of soccer consumers was Denmark: 48.8% of Danish women and 68.6% of the men stated that they were (very) interested in soccer, but only 22.8% of all respondents affirmed an interest in women's soccer matches.

Women showed no more interest in women's soccer than men. On the contrary, only 4.2% of the female and 7.1% of the male respondents on average reported any great interest. Women's soccer is most popular in the UK, where 29.5% of the female and 42.1% of the male respondents reported that they were (very) interested. In Poland only 2.6% of the women and 7.8% of the men declared any interest. In Denmark 19.5% of the women and 26.7% of the men while in Germany 26% of the women and 26.7% of the men reported that they were interested or very interested in women's matches. These results reveal quite clearly that male players, teams and clubs are much more attractive for sponsors or advertisers than female players.

Interest in women's soccer may just mean following the top events; it does not necessarily mean interest in league matches, and it may also not lead to active consumption or attending matches at

the stadium. As several studies show, league matches in Europe often take place in – almost – empty stadiums. In UEFA countries, matches between top women’s teams are attended on average by 350 spectators, the highest average attendance figures at national league matches are attained in Germany with 2,500 spectators. Games of top teams may even attract more than 10,000 soccer supporters and fans. However, in eight UEFA countries only around 50 individuals, mostly family members, attend women’s league games (UEFA, 2015). In contrast, men’s matches reach attendance figures of up to 80,000.⁷ The small numbers of spectators have a decisive impact on the clubs’ budgets as gate receipts are an important revenue source.

Journalists, too, show little interest in women’s soccer and female players, who receive scarcely any media exposure and attract few advertisement contracts or sponsorships. There is a large body of literature based on research in various European countries which provides convincing evidence that media sport in general and media soccer in particular are men’s affairs (Peeters & Elling, 2015)– played by men, presented by men, focusing on men and consumed by men. Men’s teams and male players are, for example, testimonials for Pepsi, Turkish Airlines or Mercedes. They often display a form of ‘exaggerated masculinity’ by starring as warriors, Ninjas, fighters in a cage or conducting duels on the soccer field. Not only their salaries as players but also their roles as testimonials for various products generate a large income. Thus, it is not surprising that 13 soccer players appear on the Forbes List of the world’s 100 best earning athletes. Number 3 is Cristiano Ronaldo (after two boxers) with an income of 150 million dollars a year. It goes without saying that no female soccer player is on this list, which names only three women: tennis and golf players.⁸

When one explores the reasons behind the gendered media coverage of soccer, gender theories as well as the concepts of ‘agenda setting’ and ‘framing’ provide clues for interpretations.

Gender has to be understood as a social construction at a societal, interactional and individual level. It is embedded in social institutions and identity. Gender is not something we have but something we perform and do. Gender stereotypes and the ‘doing gender’ of players and fans construct ‘real’ soccer as a men’s game and women’s soccer as something different (Connell, 2002).

Soccer gains its importance to large extent via media coverage. Journalists justify their lack of interest in women’s soccer by referring to the expectations of their readers/viewers. However, it must be emphasized that the media have the power of agenda setting and framing and thus influence the tastes and consumption patterns of their consumers. Journalists (have to) select their topics from numerous issues and events, condense them and transform them into narratives. They set topics such as men’s soccer ‘on the agenda, creating and supporting interests of their consumers’ (Fenton, 2000, p. 298).

But the media do not simply describe events; they give them meaning by ‘framing’ them, i.e. presenting them in specific contexts conveying specific messages and influencing the ways in which their consumers interpret and explain the world around them. Men’s soccer is often presented – also in advertisements – as a battle and male player as heroes fighting for the honor of their clubs or their countries. Soccer played by women is considered a different game. The ‘difference paradigm’ is created by comparisons with men’s matches, in particular men’s performances and men’s ways of playing, which sets the gender difference on the agenda. However, female players are faced with an additional dilemma as playing soccer and staging traditional femininity do not fit together, which may prevent sponsors and advertisers from staging female soccer players. Among many other voices, the Washington Post complained that the Women's World Cup in 2015 attracted far fewer of the “marketing blitzes or mega-deals seen in men's tournaments, and far less of the cash or corporate support, a glaring loss for players and fans of the world's most popular sport” (Harwell,

2015). In contrast to many other companies, Nike produced a commercial, showcasing powerful female soccer players.

Concluding remarks

Soccer has developed from a men's game to a sport which increasingly attracts girls and women. In many European countries women's soccer is thriving, in particular with regard to the quality of the game and the numbers of players. However, women's teams have on average few resources, and female players are either amateurs or semi-professionals. The main problem of players and teams is the lack of interest shown by the media and the small number of fans, which prevents advertisers and sponsors from focusing on female players. Whereas male soccer stars enact masculinity on and off the field, traditional femininity and playing soccer are incompatible. However, the latest developments signalize a change: outstanding female players such as Marta have become stars on and off the field. It has to be hoped that these developments continue.

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¹ FIFA, InfoPlus, n.d.

https://web.archive.org/web/20070614094554/http://www.fifa.com/mm/document/fifafacts/ffprojects/ip-401_06e_tv_2658.pdf

² See e.g. the numbers of female members of the Danish Football Federation (DBU) http://www.dbu.dk/oevrigt_indhold/Om_DBU/DBUs%20historie/medlemstal.aspx or the membership statistics of the German football Federation <http://www.dfb.de/index.php?id=1000489>.

³ See the teams which participated in the ECA study (European Club Association, n.d.). <http://www.blossoming.it/portfolio-item/eca-womens-club-football-analysis/>

⁴ UEFA 2014-15, 36; see also the numbers of members of the various sport federations in Germany, http://www.dosb.de/fileadmin/sharepoint/Materialien%20%7B82A97D74-2687-4A29-9C16-4232BAC7DC73%7D/Bestandserhebung_2014.pdf

⁵ See the list of the best earning sport stars <http://www.forbes.com/athletes/list/#tab:overall>

⁶ FREE Project (Football Research in an Enlarged Europe)(2014): "Survey on Football in European Public Opinion". Information about the project: <http://www.free-project.eu/Pages/Welcome.aspx>

⁷ See <http://www.dfb.de/bundesliga/statistik/zuschauerzahlen/>

⁸ See <http://www.forbes.com/athletes/list/#tab:overall>