

THE RISE OF THE LIONESSES

**INCREDIBLE
MOMENTS
- FROM -
WOMEN'S
FOOTBALL**

FLO LLOYD-HUGHES



"IF MEN CAN PLAY FOOTBALL, SO CAN WOMEN":



NETTIE HONEYBALL KICKS OFF



In July 2022, over 80,000 people packed into a sold-out Wembley stadium to watch England take on Germany in the 2022 Euros final. It was a historic moment for women's football in England. That summer, we were glued to our TV screens as women's football took the country by storm. But not many people know that this wasn't the first time that women's football had gripped the nation. Around a hundred years ago, women's football was drawing huge crowds up and down the country.

Women have played football in England for hundreds of years. From poems, we know that

women were involved in the game as far back as the 1600s. In the 1700s, fisherwomen in Scotland played informal games with each other. But it wasn't until the 1800s, when football was formally established as a sport, with written rules and regulations, that the women's game really spread.

FOOTBALL FACT

The first set of official rules for football were written down in 1848 by students at Cambridge, who wanted to make the differences between football and rugby clear. The Laws of the Game were drawn up in 1863 and are still used today.

Once there were proper rules, clubs and teams could play each other without arguments. Men's leagues started up and, by the late 1800s, women's teams were forming up and down the country too. At the time, it wasn't normal for women to play sport. Women didn't have much independence and weren't allowed to vote. They were expected to be at home to cook, clean and look after their children. But, despite this, women were playing football anyway.

The first officially recorded women's football match took place in 1881 between two teams, one representing Scotland and one England. Neither team were actually representing their country, as the match had been organized by two theatre businessmen as a way to make money.

Alec Gordon, from Scotland, had seen how popular the sport was getting across Britain and the potential money that could be made from organizing a series of matches. He decided to partner with another businessman from England and put on games in Scotland and England. Most of the players involved weren't even footballers, but were women from a ballet company.

It's hard to know how many informal matches were actually played before this game in 1881. At this time, newspapers were regularly writing about the men's game, but rarely reported on women's football.

When the women's game *was* written about by male journalists, the tone was disrespectful and rude. The coverage focused on the players' appearance, not the actual match. Journalists would stress that football was a game for men

and it was about physical strength. There were even violent pitch invasions at some of the women's games, where spectators ran onto the pitch to disrupt the match.

This didn't deter keen women players. In 1894, the British Ladies' Football Club (BLFC), the most famous team of the time, was founded. The team was set up by Lady Florence Dixie, a wealthy aristocrat. As a feminist, she believed that men and women should be treated equally in all areas of society.

Lady Florence sponsored the team. Alfred Hewitt Smith was the manager, and the captain was a woman called Nettie Honeyball. This was a made-up name and we still don't know her real name, but some historians think it was Mary Hutson. At the time, lots of women were scared about what might happen if they were seen to be doing things that were considered "unladylike". Football was one of those things, so it seems likely that Nettie came up with a fake name to protect herself.

Nettie needed players for her new team so she posted an advert in the newspaper. When she was interviewed by a newspaper in 1895,

she said the aim of her team was to show the world “that women are not the ‘ornamental and useless’ creatures men have pictured”. In another interview in the same year, she insisted that “if men can play football, so can women”.

Despite her passion and commitment, lots of people laughed at Nettie’s team. Some even said that it was dangerous for women to play because there was a myth that it would damage their bodies. Others were outraged that Nettie was going to charge for tickets to the team’s games and at the idea that women could make money from sport.

Most of the discussion was about what the women would wear to play. At this time, women wore corsets around their waists that were very uncomfortable and restrictive, and were expected to cover their legs and ankles. This clothing was not easy to play football in. But Nettie and her teammates embodied the fight for a new “rational dress” for women, where women campaigned for the right to wear clothes that allowed them freedom to move easily and take part in activities such as cycling or football.

This new style of dress, which Nettie was photographed wearing in some of the few images that exist of her in the 1890s, consisted of a cap, long-sleeved shirt, shorts, long socks and shin guards. It wasn't dissimilar to what the men were playing in during this time.

Nettie's team played their first official match in 1895 at Alexandra Palace in north London. Although they had been training with men's teams twice a week, they didn't have an opposition, so the team split into two and played North versus South. Over 10,000 people turned up to watch.

The newspaper reports said the match was terrible and that the crowd left at half-time. They complained that the standard was poor and the players didn't even know the rules. But Nettie didn't listen. The BLFC went on to tour the country playing matches against men's teams and attracting thousands of fans.

Unfortunately, in 1897, Nettie's team had to fold because they didn't have enough money to continue. However, the impact they had was huge. Other teams began to pop up around the country off the back of the success of the BLFC, and

women's football continued to grow.

Nettie was determined to show that women's football was sport and entertainment, just like the men's game. She had fought for women's equality and she knew that football could be powerful in improving women's rights and position in society.

Her fighting spirit remains at the heart of the women's game. Players today still face similar challenges: to earn money for playing sport, to be paid equally with men's players and to be judged on their ability rather than their appearance. Thanks to the courage of people like Nettie, this generation of players is transforming the way the sport is viewed by fans.



*To my team, QPR, who made me fall in love with
football and to everyone who fought against the
odds to make women's football what it is today.*

F.L.H.

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