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The Business of Football - Mini documentary

Polly Bancroft:

[MUSIC PLAYING]

POLLY BANCROFT: I'm Polly Bancroft, the general manager for women and girls' football at Brighton and Hove Albion. As the general manager at Brighton and Hove Albion, I've got a strategic remit for the women and girls' program, which oversees the operations. So that's making sure that we meet the license criteria for the Women's Super League.

I also engage with senior staff in marketing, communications, commercial, legal, finance, again to just make sure that the operation side of the women and girls' program is sufficient. We have six female teams here at the club. So, it's overseeing all of those, as well.

The team here at Brighton became professional in 2019. And since then, I suppose there's always going to be a bit of friction between the speed of growth and a sustainable budget. We're really lucky here at Brighton that we're supported by a chairman and a board that are really enthusiastic about the women's game.

We're sat here in an 8.5-million-pound facility that's dedicated to the women and girls' game. But I think that speed of growth, both within the league and internationally in terms of women's football and comparing that to trying to be sustainable is always going to have a bit of friction.

The women's first team play their matches at Crawley Town. Before the pandemic, we had an average of 1,300 spectators. Post-pandemic in the most current season, we've got an average of 2,000. So, we've actually seen an increase of about 47%, which has been great. We do know, however, that that is a challenge, both to understand who our target audience is and how we increase attendances, as well. We were given some insight from the FA on who they could be. So, we're just testing that out.

We've also done quite a bit of work to try and draw across fans of the men's first team to come and watch the women's first team. But clearly, there is still a gap between the 30-odd

thousand that watch the men's first team and the 2,000 that watch the women's. So that's still a key area of focus for us and not easy when you're playing sort of 20 miles north of the main club stadia. So yeah, I suppose raising the profile and trying to get the message out there to new fans is something of a challenge and we'll continue to focus on.

The social and digital marketing is huge. I think it's not only the club that have a platform. But the players have their own platforms, too-- so widening that reach in terms of the number of people that you can engage with. But yeah, it's a key tool for us in addition to the more traditional forms, such as the website.

And we've got very good local partners in the media, both on the TV and the radio, that we're able to tap into. So that helps. But yeah, digital, you can just be a lot more creative with it. And we've seen content on TikTok. We started to use Facebook, as well, of course, as Twitter and Instagram.

The commercial structure at Brighton and Hove Albion is mirrored from the men's to the women's. So, we're very similar in terms of shirt sponsorship and I suppose the global partners within the club. But we've started to see companies approach to the club who are interested in just the women's.

So, we haven't quite got there yet. But I think certainly because of the recent broadcast deal and more interest in the women's game, the phone is ringing, rather than us being on the phone. So that's really positive. And we'll wait and see what the chairman decides that he wants to do with that one.

The last three or four years, we've started casting the net a bit further with our recruitment. So, we actually have an international player from South Korea, as well as from Sweden, the Netherlands, and Finland, as well as some of the home counties. So, we're going a lot further with our recruitment.

That's also replicated in our women's under 21s team, where we have players from Belgium. We have players with Swiss nationality, as well. So, I think that's really a marker of the professionalization of the women's game. And that's filtering through to our younger teams, as well.

I think the development of the women's game in the next five years, I think we'll see a change in ownership of the league. So currently, the Women's Super League sits under the FA's ownership and governance. But I think we'll see a transition away to maybe a third party delivering that.

I think we're in the first year of a three-year broadcast deal. So, the next broadcast deal will be even more interesting, hopefully, both in terms of finance and also eyeballs and visibility. So, I think those are the two main pieces, really, for the women's game moving forwards.

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