

# Carrie Dunn on the history of women's football

STEPH DOEHLER: So Carrie, we know that women's football was flourishing in the early 1900s, and it essentially came to a halt in 1921 with the Football Association's ban. So I want to ask you, what happened to women's football between 1921 and then 1971, when that ban was lifted? And why was the latter half of that period so significant in the development of the women's game?

CARRIE DUNN: Yeah, it's an interesting thing. Because those of us who've kind of worked on women's history, we see and we say quite often women's football was banned in 1921, which it was. It was banned by the governing bodies, who said you can't play it on affiliated FA grounds, et cetera, et cetera. We want nothing to do with you. It's not suitable. Unsuitable for females is the phrase that they used. But women still carried on playing football.

They didn't kind of sit there, and wait, and think, oh, OK, the FA said no, we'll stop playing now. Because women's football had been so successful. I mean, we probably all know about the Dick, Kerr Ladies, for example, and how many people they were pulling into their matches, the amount of money they were raising for charity. But it wasn't just these big teams. It was kind of more recreational teams. We know that all over England, and Scotland, and Wales, and Ireland, there were plenty of teams who were playing football, not necessarily in organised leagues.

Although, immediately after the ban, they did start trying to organise kind of more formally. But there were women playing football from 1921 to 1971, even though the governing body said no. But the problem was that they couldn't play on affiliated pitches. So they were playing on rugby pitches. They were playing on scrubland. They were playing on whatever kind of space they could find. And of course, the other thing was that, if any men were found helping these women out, then they would also get banned from men's football.

So there were these kind of sanctions looming as well. So what we see kind of in the 1960s, we see a new generation of women coming through who didn't know that women's football had been banned in this way. And they're watching the men's football-- we've got the World Cup win in 1966, and we've got this boom of interest in football. And these girls, these teenagers, these young women are thinking, why aren't we playing football?

So it's quite a famous story now that Pat Gregory, who is one of the founder members of the Women's FA in England, as a young teenager she writes to her local newspaper and puts a letter in and says, why aren't women playing football? I'd like to play football. And then she gets inundated with letters from other young women saying, I want to join your team. Of course, she didn't have a team. But she ends up setting up a team, and then ultimately the Women's FA.

Because there is this desire for young women to play football. That they want to have the same opportunities to play their new favorite sport as their male counterparts do. And so we see the organisation setup of the Women's FA in the late 1960s. They start to kind of organise a league with home and away matches and being able to access some facilities. And then we see, leading up to 1971, some European and international tournaments being established independently.

Now, there had been talk in the 1960s of a Women's World Cup being set up after, just to piggyback on the success of the England men's team. And some of the England men's team were really keen to be part

of it. They were being seen in photoshoots and promoting it, and it ended up never happening. But what we see in 1971-- quite famously now-- thank goodness-- is the Mexico unofficial Women's World Cup. It's basically an invitational tournament. And a team of a British invitationals go over. So Harry Batt, who is the Chiltern Valley ladies' manager at the time, takes his squad over in the middle of the summer. And what is fascinating about this that I found in recent years, having met and spoken to some of these women who were part of that squad, was that the adults who were playing in the teams at the time couldn't get the time off work to go over for six weeks to Mexico, so you ended up with a squad of quite young teenagers going to Mexico, playing in front of 100,000 fans, and this incredible experience of a lifetime.

And then they get back. And because it's an unofficial tournament, it's unaffiliated, Harry Batt is banned for life. The girls are also banned from playing for smaller amounts of time. And then we start to see the big governing body saying, hang on, women's football is more popular than we ever expected. They're doing it without our say-so. We're going to need to start to take it in to our set up.

So we start to see the governing bodies being instructed to fold women's football globally into their set up. It's a very, very long and slow process. So even though the Women's FA affiliated to the FA in the early 1970s, they weren't really kind of part of the-- women's football wasn't really part of the integral structure until the early 1990s. It's 20 years later. So it's a long and slow process after the ban is formally lifted for women's football to really get the same kind of level of support, and backing, and attention that it really needed.