

Carrie Dunn on fan engagement

STEPH DOEHLER: So I think most people would agree that the general engagement in women's football has increased over recent years across the globe, but how is female engagement in World Cup events more broadly developed particularly over the last couple of tournaments?

CARRIE DUNN: It's a really interesting one. So my research hinged on the 2015 World Cup in Canada. And I think if I did a similar project with a European tournament, I might get slightly different results because being in Canada it was very, very easy for the American fans, huge numbers of American fans, to travel to support their team. But what I've seen in the travelling fans in women's football, international football tournament is it's not necessarily just women travelling, and it's people making a deliberate choice to support the women's team over their male counterparts.

There's qualities associated with women's international football that aren't necessarily associated with the men's game. And again, I think particularly in England, this might have changed a little bit in recent years because the England men's team, I think, have a different public image than they might have done 10 years ago. But at the time in 2015, there was this idea that men's football was very kind of money-driven, the players didn't really care about the fans or playing for their country, it was a very mercenary kind of sport. Whereas women's football, they played for the love of the game, they're kind of enthusiastic, they're kind of a throwback to a more kind of Corinthian era.

And I think that's kind of fascinating because obviously in recent years, obviously there's been this drive towards professionalisation of women's football. The women are playing football because it's their job, just as the men do. But I think there's still this kind of link between amateurism and women's football in a positive way, but men's football just doesn't really have anymore. And so we see the fan engagement with tournaments, and we don't have necessarily the same kind of strict division between fans outside the stadium like you would have kind of home pubs and away pubs in men's football. We don't have that kind of clear demarcation in women's football.

We also see it's not necessarily people don't pick their own country to support in women's football, they might be following a particular player that they like or a coach or for some other reason that they're supporting that country. There's less kind of nationalism I think, circulating around it. So as I say, I think that's changing a little bit now as we see this push towards professionalisation across the world. But 2015 as the kind of sea change of women's football, particularly for England. I think those were the kind of key aspects that we started to see in the fan engagement with it.