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# ARRIVAL

How Scotland's Women Took Their Place on  
the World Stage and Inspired a Generation

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S T E V E N   L A W T H E R



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## Foreword

# Get Together Now, Find Hope

THERE WAS something fateful about the seats we found ourselves in at the Parc des Princes in Paris. They were low down in the first tier, right behind the goal at the north end of the stadium. They had afforded us the perfect view as Kim Little gave Scotland the lead against Argentina in their last group match of the 2019 World Cup and would later give us an unenviable vantage point over how the match unravelled.

We had departed Edinburgh Airport on the first flight to Paris earlier that morning. The decision to travel to France had been made months earlier as we watched Shelley Kerr's squad secure qualification against Albania. Having followed the team to the European Championship in the Netherlands two years earlier, there was never any question that we'd be present at their first-ever World Cup.

The trip was a poignant retracing of the past. Twenty-one years earlier, we had made the same journey, along with my brother, Neville, to watch the men's team in the opening game of the 1998 World Cup, the last time Scotland had been represented on the world stage. The anticipation and fear we'd

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experienced before Scotland faced Brazil in the Stade de France 21 years previously were replicated in the nervous hours before the Argentina match.

Football is a magnificent sport. It produces drama and excitement that few other sports can match. There are incidents from over 20 years ago that I can still recall with vivid clarity. Brian Potter's penalty save for Raith Rovers in the 1994 League Cup semi-final, or James McFadden giving Scotland the lead in the first leg of a European Championship play-off with the Dutch at Hampden. The joy and emotion felt in these moments still linger. Yet, along with the highs, it can also deliver crushing lows. Lewis Vaughan hitting the post in the last minute when Raith needed just one goal to secure promotion, or trudging away from the Amsterdam Arena having just watched Scotland lose 6-0 in the second leg of that European Championship play-off.

The Argentina match delivered both extremes of emotion, just not in the right order. We journeyed from the elation of racing into a three-goal lead to the unimaginable despair of surrendering that lead and exiting the tournament. At the final whistle we stood dazed, trying to comprehend what had unfolded in front of us. When we finally accepted that Scotland's tournament was over, we headed to the front of the Parc des Princes to wait for the squad to emerge. It was as much a distraction as anything else. We knew that if we returned straight to our hotel then the rest of the evening would be smothered in despondency.

We were not alone in not wanting to go home. Another group of Scottish fans had gathered, similarly bereft and equally keen to impart their frustrations about the vagaries of video-assisted refereeing, the performance of the officials and how Scotland's tournament had just concluded. A shared post-mortem and an hour-long wait afforded us the chance to decompress from the intensity of the match and reflect on

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the wider context of what the team had achieved. They had qualified for their first-ever World Cup, graced the biggest stage in world football and demonstrated that they could compete. The joy they had provided, both at the tournament and in qualification, were amongst our favourite moments watching football.

When the Scotland squad finally emerged, most still visibly upset from the match, a number of players took time out to engage with those who had gathered. There was a touching personal moment, when goalkeeper Jenna Fife, who had coached our daughter at Edinburgh Sports Academy, came across to give her a hug and thank us for travelling to support the squad. It was a gesture that embodied the warmth between supporters and team.

The true impact of that night was brought home months later when our daughter was writing an article for the Raith Rovers match-day programme and picked out waiting outside the Parc des Princes for the Scotland team as her favourite World Cup memory. It was an extraordinary assessment given that we went on to attend another ten matches at the World Cup, right up to the final itself. Amongst all of the brilliance that the tournament had to offer and numerous moments of drama, it had been the Scottish women's national team that had inspired the most. The team had not only made history, but had also left an indelible mark, winning the hearts and minds not just of one young person fortunate enough to be in France, but of thousands of young people across the nation. They may have failed to progress, but they had finally arrived.

# Recognition

IT IS impossible to know exactly what was in the mind of the Scottish Football Association as they submitted their vote against formally recognising women's football to UEFA in 1971. Was it based on a belief that football just wasn't a game for females? Did they feel that women's physiques were not suited to playing the sport? Was it a fear that allowing women to play would somehow undermine the essence of the men's game? Or was it simply good old-fashioned sexism? We'll probably never know exactly what contributed to their logic, but in voting against the recognition of women's football, the message sent was clear – females playing football in Scotland was not acceptable. The concept that women playing football was somehow wrong was not a new one. It had been a well-worn argument used over the decades in an attempt to belittle, ridicule and undermine. At the moment a woman first kicked a football, there was probably a voice, most likely male, questioning her right to do so.

It was this long-standing view that led to the mostly male crowd invading the pitch at one of the earliest Scotland v England contests in Glasgow in 1881. It is unlikely that the two teams lining up at the start of the match were truly

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representative of the best players in the two countries at the time, with some suspicion that they called themselves ‘Scotland’ and ‘England’ merely to attract an audience, but the pitch invasion and the chaos that ensued meant that the game couldn’t be played to a conclusion. The contest, a series of three planned matches between the sides, was greeted with derision in the press, with the *Glasgow News* reporting that, ‘Football is not a game for women; and the spectacle of a score of girls careering about a field in knickerbockers is not to be defended on any ground of public utility.’

Opposition to women’s football reached its peak in the 1920s when the Football Association in England passed a resolution banning female footballers from using their grounds and pitches. Any hope of the game north of the border escaping the same punitive measure was extinguished when the Scottish FA followed their lead and extended the spirit of the ban in Scotland. A formal acknowledgement of their position would not be made until the late 1940s, but a number of Scottish clubs’ requests to host women’s matches were met with the response that ‘This Association does not approve of clubs arranging or sponsoring or letting grounds for Ladies’ football matches.’

It is impossible now to know exactly how the women’s game in Scotland would have evolved over the following years had the football authorities at the time chosen to embrace it rather than attempt to eradicate it, but it was a huge setback, with a generation of girls and women denied the opportunity to play. Matches still took place at unaffiliated grounds, but accessing pitches, facilities and officials became a constant struggle for those who wanted to participate.

It would take until the early 1970s before the possibility of real change arrived.

With numerous women’s leagues emerging across Europe and two successful, but unofficial, Women’s World Cups held at the start of the decade, UEFA began to take notice. The

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governing body responsible for men's football in Europe moved swiftly to bring the women's game under their influence by recommending that national governing bodies across Europe assume responsibility for the sport. The move was more likely motivated by money and self-interest than a burning desire to advance the women's game, but it would finally force every national association, including the Scottish FA, to grant official recognition to women's football.

UEFA's initial communication of their intentions was met with resistance in Glasgow. Minutes from a Scottish FA meeting in September 1970 reported: 'There was submitted correspondence with UEFA who enquired as to the Association's attitude towards women's football, and with the Women's Football Association (WFA), who sought recognition, in Scotland. The committee were unanimous in their refusal.'

Two months later, the WFA tried their luck again, only to be met with the same response. This policy of belligerence continued right up until the UEFA vote on the subject in 1971. Astonishingly, in that vote, every single football association in Europe voted in favour of formally recognising the women's game, except one – Scotland.

There have been many moments in the history of the Scottish FA when it has been subject to criticism. It is perhaps the inevitable fate of a governing body to be unloved by the fans who follow the game, with many quick to perceive incompetence or bias. The majority of criticism is unfounded or overblown, but by choosing to stand alone as a beacon of intolerance towards women's football in 1971, then, for once, the organisation deserved every ounce of the derision aimed its way.

There was hope amongst those campaigning for women's football in Scotland that the passing of UEFA's motion would result in a change in thinking at the Scottish FA, but their Secretary, Willie Allan, was unmoved, interpreting it as only

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a recommendation not an instruction. If Allan hoped that his opponents would lose heart as a result of his refusal to follow the rest of Europe's lead, he was wrong. 'I felt like a suffragette,' says Elsie Cook, one of the leading voices for women's football at the time. 'I was adamant, "Why should girls not be allowed to play the game they have come to love?"'

Within a year, Cook had helped form the Scottish Women's Football Association, becoming its inaugural secretary in 1972. The league comprised just six teams: Aberdeen, Dundee Strikers, Edinburgh Dynamos, Motherwell AEI, Stewarton Thistle and Westhorn United. But it was a significant step forward. Cook was also instrumental in setting up the first official international match between Scotland and England. The squad was selected for the game over three months of trials under the guidance of manager Rab Stewart, a former Kilmarnock and St Mirren player. There was no support from the national association, so the squad travelled to training in a milk van and the team's jerseys were bought in a jumble sale in Stewarton, with Cook personally sewing on each Scotland badge.

On the morning of the match, they improvised to make kick-off when their minibus didn't arrive at Anderston bus station in Glasgow. Cook stopped a passing furniture van and asked the driver if he could take the team to the match in the back of his lorry, which he duly did. The Scotland team played the match at Ravenscraig Park in Greenock, the venue selected to avoid contravening the ban on playing on an affiliated pitch. 'I can remember it was icy and it was absolutely freezing,' recalls Jean Hunter, making her Scotland debut aged 17. 'I did a slide tackle and went right off the pitch.'

The team performed well in the early stages of the game, with goals from Mary Carr and Rose Reilly putting them 2-1 ahead. Unfortunately, the England squad had considerably more experience and managed to score twice in the second half to win the game 3-2. 'If it had been a proper park, we would

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have won no bother,' reflects Scotland left-half Sandra Walker. 'The ability in the team was unbelievable.'

The team may have been narrowly defeated, but they had created a moment of history, although it would take another 47 years for them to receive the recognition of an official cap for their effort.

The writing was soon on the wall for the Scottish FA's long-standing policy of exclusion. The rest of European football had long since moved on and at home the Sex Discrimination Act was working its way through Parliament, legislation that would effectively end discrimination. There would soon be no legal basis to exclude women from the sport they loved. On 29 August 1974 the Scottish FA finally relented and passed a resolution stating: 'It was agreed to give recognition to women's football.'

That simple sentence and those nine short words now seem wholly inadequate in reflecting both the significance of the decision and the struggle that so many women had endured to reach that point, but the surrender was welcome. With the ban lifted, Celtic manager Jock Stein became one of the first to reach out, inviting the Scotland Women's National Team to play in an exhibition match at Parkhead before a European Cup tie against Olympiakos. It may have only been a short 30-minute exhibition match, but the symbolism of the invitation was not lost on the Scotland players. 'After the game Jock Stein stood at the tunnel and shook every lassie by the hand and thanked her very much,' recalled Elsie Cook. 'That was the first time we'd officially been able to play at a senior ground.'

The restrictive and unjust ban had at last been lifted, with women's football finally receiving the recognition it deserved. It was a moment to applaud, but those involved in the game knew that they were still a long distance from having the support and investment required to flourish. The battle may have been won, but the real struggle was just about to begin.