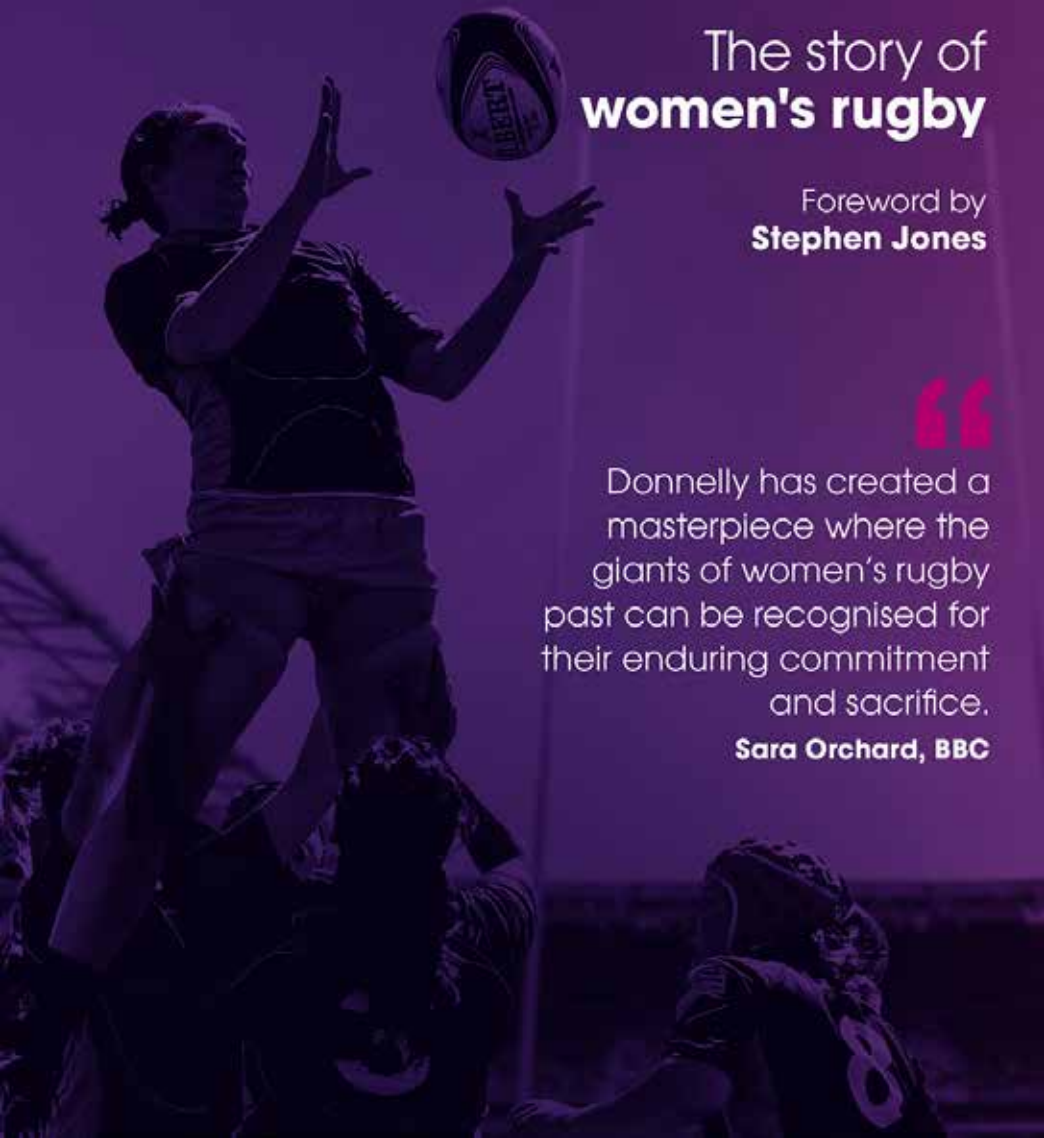
Ali Donnelly

SCRUM QUEENS

The story of **women's rugby**

Foreword by
Stephen Jones



"Donnelly has created a masterpiece where the giants of women's rugby past can be recognised for their enduring commitment and sacrifice.

Sara Orchard, BBC

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Kick-off

ON 30 December 2020, Becky Hammon, the assistant coach of men's NBA team the San Antonio Spurs, took over running the game when the team's male head coach was thrown off court after arguing with officials. It was a historic moment – no woman had ever been the lead coach in an NBA league game before.

Or no one could be sure if they had.

Afterwards, ESPN tweeted its 36 million followers: 'Spurs assistant Becky Hammon filled in for an ejected Gregg Popovich. She's believed to be the first woman to act as head coach during an NBA regular-season game.'

The tweet attracted some ridicule. Surely with all their resources and knowledge ESPN could do better than that. Either she either was the first woman to act as head coach, or she wasn't.

ESPN, who can tell you absolutely everything about what the men of the NBA are achieving on the court – how many assists, how many points, how many blocks – faced the same challenge everyone else does when it comes to reporting on historical moments involving women in sport. It's incredibly difficult, almost impossible, to know accurately what, when and where anything happened for the first time.

The modern stories of women in sport are increasingly well documented, with TV coverage, great volumes of online and

print media exposure and growing social media content, but the decades of history and the women who came before are not.

Most women's sports, including rugby, took root independently of the national governing bodies running their sports, who catered in the early years almost exclusively for men and boys. Yet today they largely rely on those same organisations, still dominated by men, who once shunned, silenced, banned and excluded them, to keep the story of their true origins and history alive.

Unsurprisingly many of the game's national governing bodies don't accurately publicly document the story of how women's rugby actually began in their countries. Some simply don't know and haven't done the research. Others, however, know well that the history doesn't suit the narrative of inclusivity they now promote and, in most cases, they would frankly rather not highlight their past treatment of the women's game.

Writing in the *Guardian* about women's cricket in 2019, journalist Kirby Fenwick, wrote about the fact that sporting organisations too often airbrush the history of their women's game. She noted that Cricket Australia's website neglected to even mention the Women's Cricket Council who ran the women's game across the country for 70 years for women. Rugby is guilty of this neglect too

Even as I write this in late 2021, there is little to nothing on the official websites of leading rugby nations that tells anyone the true history of how the women's game got up and running initially in their countries.

The 'history' page on the Scottish website doesn't mention women at all, ditto Ireland which has a convenient list of all its international captains but only the male ones. If you want to read about the Black Ferns, the brilliant New Zealand women's team, you must navigate through AllBlacks.com, a website named after the country's men's team. There you will find nothing either about the amazing work of many pioneering New Zealand

women who tried to get women's rugby up and running long before the New Zealand Rugby Union ever got involved.

Although many unions are starting to lean into the history of their women's game with occasional pieces of content, most prefer to start the story of women's rugby in their countries only when the game was integrated into their organisation, often ignoring the decades of hard graft and activity beforehand.

Even with all we now know, patchy record-keeping means the accuracy of many 'firsts' in women's rugby is questionable. Where records do exist of specific markers or milestones, the sport often remains completely in the dark about them.

In 2007, the 25th anniversary of the first ever women's international Test game, for example, passed by almost unrecognised, even by the nations who took part. It was France v Netherlands by the way, and there's more on that to come later.

Limited retained written accounts of the earliest years of the sport have been unearthed and it is only now, or at least only in the past decade, that enough dedicated media coverage of women's rugby means that its more modern history will be secured for future generations.

What is particularly hard to swallow about this lost history is the narrative that rugby had once been for men only and that governing bodies were actually progressive for having allowed women to join in from the 1960s. That, as this book will highlight, is just untrue. Women's rugby had a rich history before being suppressed by authorities going as far back as the 1800s.

It's true that women fought for the right to re-enter rugby from the 1960s and from there it grew into the game we have now, but the erasure of the sport's earlier history means that only now is more information coming to light.

On that front, things are improving considerably. Detailed research by journalists, historians and academics is starting to build a picture of women's rugby in the very early years. Footage

is emerging of the game from as far back as the 1920s and there is genuine interest in understanding more about how women first got involved.

The attempts to rectify the near invisibility of the people who helped get women's rugby where it is today, with a professional Olympic sevens game and a part-professional and burgeoning Test 15s game, are starting to shed light on the impact of some genuinely inspirational men and women.

Several projects and developments mean momentum is steadily building to ensure the history of the earliest years is understood.

New Zealand academic Professor Jennifer Curtin, for example, has traced the start of the women's game in her country back to the late 1800s. Women's rugby writer John Birch's research unearthed the memoirs of Emily Valentine, who describes playing rugby in 1887 in Ireland. More recently a partnership between De Montfort University Leicester and the World Rugby Museum at Twickenham has resulted in a comprehensive study of women's involvement in rugby by Lydia Furse, who has now successfully completed her PhD on the topic.

Though we may now take for granted the fact that thanks to regular television coverage, the game's biggest moments will be archived and recorded, there are years of work ahead to find out more about what happened in those early days, to celebrate the initial milestones and never forget where women's rugby came from.

That is why I wanted to write this book. The following pages tell us about what we now know, how the game took off in its early years, and looks at where women's rugby is heading.

It attempts to highlight some of the major moments on the field too through the narratives of the biggest and best games, and weaves in the stories of some of the players and officials who have done so much to get the game into the shape it is in today.

This will not be the only book written about the history of women's rugby, but it is one of the first. I hope it is a springboard for many more so that the stories from our brilliant game can be forever preserved.

Rugby's first lady

The story of Emily Valentine, so well told by John Birch who runs Scrumqueens.com alongside me, is one of the earliest documented records of any woman playing rugby at any level. While there are some records of attempts for social games to be played before this, there is nothing definitive, and his research produced a remarkable tale that has gained global interest.

The story began in the 1880s at the Portora Royal School in Enniskillen, Ireland. The school had a wealth of famous alumni with former students going on to have high-profile careers in football, cricket, athletics and the arts. Playwrights Oscar Wilde and Samuel Beckett both attended the school.

But it's the tale of a ten-year-old girl that entered women's rugby folklore.

The school was going through a particularly difficult period in the 1880s after the departure of a headteacher who took many pupils with him to a new school and a decision to stop taking on boarders.

The arrival of new assistant headteacher William Valentine in 1883 brought three new pupils who all loved the game of rugby – his children William, John and Emily. They played among themselves and with friends.

Although the school didn't have an official team, intra-school matches were played every Saturday and matches against Enniskillen RFC were recorded.

The discovery of Emily's journals revealed that one day in 1887, the boys were playing a match and they were short of players, summoning their sister to come and join them on the field. Her memoirs vividly recall the moment.

> At last, my chance came. I got the ball. I can still feel the damp leather and the smell of it and see the tag of lacing at the opening. I grasped it and ran dodging, darting, but I was so keen to score that try that I did not pass it, perhaps when I should.
>
> I still raced on, I could see the boy coming towards me; I dodged, yes I could and breathless, with my heart thumping, my knees shaking a bit, I ran. Yes, I had done it; one last spurt and I touched down, right on the line. I had scored my try.
>
> I lay flat on my face, for a moment everything went black. I scrambled up, gave a hasty rub down to my knees. A ragged cheer went up from the spectators. I grinned at my brothers. It was all I had hoped for.

Her story is remarkable, not just because its history has been preserved and was told so many years later for the first time, but also because it would be another 100 years before Ireland's first women's rugby club was formed.

It's unlikely that what Emily Valentine did at the time was unique. There were probably plenty of other girls who picked up the ball and ran with it or got involved informally. But hers remains the earliest recorded written story.

We know, thanks to archive newspaper reports, that a version of women's football was being played in England in the 1870s and 1880s, but it is not entirely clear whether it was football or rugby, with write-ups describing the scores invariably as goals or touchdowns. Furse's PhD also points to research from Dr Victoria Dawson indicating that in Hull, also in 1887, two women's teams played against each other but the crowds were not amused and invaded the pitch.

It's clear now that the women who did play rugby in the 1800s likely did so either sporadically, anonymously or in the face of misgivings from many around them. While Emily had

the support of her brothers and loved her involvement, there will likely have been many more women and girls desperate to play but simply not allowed. Perhaps they played in secret.

Women were certainly playing sport at the time. Women competed at Wimbledon from 1884, the first women's cricket clubs date back to the late 1880s and the 1900 Summer Olympics in Paris introduced women's events for the first time.

But rugby itself was only 60 years old as a sport when Emily Valentine describes playing in her first match in 1887 and it is likely that the earliest attempts of women to get involved in such a physical sport would not have been encouraged.

Though the start of women's involvement in other sports, most notably football and cricket, faced similar challenges – although by now cricket was being played by women regularly and it was widely played in girls' public schools by the early 20th century – the contact and physical nature of rugby made the idea of women playing even less acceptable, and press clippings and coverage from the era show that attempts to get it up and running were fiercely resisted.

While a young Emily Valentine was reflecting on the joy of playing and scoring in her first rugby game in rural Ireland, serious efforts around the same time were being made on the other side of the world to get women's rugby up and running in a more formal way.

Though it would only be a couple of years before New Zealand would become the first country in the world to give women the right to vote in parliamentary elections in 1893, attempts to empower women to play rugby – which had only existed for 20 years in the country that would go on to dominate the sport – faced significant opposition.

Dr Jennifer Curtin's research, plus club histories from the brilliant New Zealand Rugby Museum, describes the efforts of another remarkable woman, Nita Webbe, to organise a women's team and an international tour in 1891.

There is evidence that women in New Zealand were attempting to play socially. A game had apparently been played in Wellington in 1888 between a team from Wellington Girls' High School and the Hallelujah Lasses Club, although it was considered a one-off.

Webbe, just 26 years old, came up with a plan that can only be described as radical given the era. She decided to get 30 women together, divide them into two teams of 15 each and, after several weeks of training, tour the Australian colonies before returning to play a series of matches around New Zealand.

Inspired perhaps by other changes afoot in New Zealand, where women's suffrage was a powerful political issue and women were seeking more rights across all aspects of life, Webbe was taken with how popular rugby had already become in just a few decades, particularly among women who made up vast chunks of the crowds attending games all over the country.

She placed advertisements in several major newspapers around the country to attract women to come and set up a team in Auckland. The deal was that women could apply, with parental consent, and if selected, Webbe would pay the players ten shillings a week. Her advert said that players were to wear gymnasium suits with a jersey, knickerbockers and short skirts, and their hair was to be cut short.

Though there was interest from women to take up the offer, her efforts were greeted with scorn in local media with the consensus being that the game was far too rough and dangerous for women.

The *Auckland Star* ran the following editorial after Webbe's advert appeared:

> THE PROPOSED FEMALE FOOTBALL TEAM
>
> We subscribe most heartily to the doctrine that every sphere in which women are fitted to take their part should

> be as freely open to them as to men, but there are some things for which women are constitutionally unfitted, and which are essentially unwomanly. A travelling football team composed of girls appears to us to be of this character. Moreover, making every allowance for vitiated tastes in the popular craving for amusement, we cannot conceive of either men or women who have sisters of their own being attracted by such a spectacle, or encouraging a number of girls to forsake womanly employment for the purpose of entering upon a life of an itinerant footballer. It would also be well for the parents of girls who think of engaging in this enterprise to consider what will be their position if the enterprise proves a financial failure, which we sincerely hope and believe it will be. Have they obtained substantial guarantees that they will be returned to their homes, or are they liable to be left stranded – homeless and penniless in some distant city? If any respectable girls are determined to persist in this foolish enterprise, we strongly advise them to make it an indispensable condition that return tickets shall be placed in their possession before leaving Auckland, so as to ensure them a safe passage back to their homes when the venture has been proved a financial failure, as it unquestionably will be if we rightly gauge the taste of the New Zealand public in the matter of amusement.

Webbe fired back immediately with a lengthy letter defending her plan:

> It is only quite recently that your paper announced that an English team of lady cricketers were about to tour the Australian colonies, yet not one word had you to say against it. And now a team of lady footballers is projected here, you charitably hope it will end in a financial disaster. The

> football team are being taught by a regular trainer to play a clever game without any of the roughness characteristic of men's play. Strict observance to the rules will be enforced, and when they play in public, I am confident that the verdict will be not only that there has been not the slightest breach of propriety, but that a cleverer game has seldom been seen here. If it is permissible for ladies to participate in gymnastics, swimming matches, and cricket teams, is it not equally permissible for ladies to play football! To draw a line between them would be to make a distinction without a difference.

There is evidence that Webbe managed to get her players together – a newspaper in Poverty Bay wrote in June 1891 that 30 girls were training in Auckland – but the overall mission never got off the ground. About a month later, newspapers reported that the scheme had been abandoned with suggestions that Webbe and her husband Frederick did not have the money to carry out the plan.

But while that specific tour might not have gone ahead, women's rugby in New Zealand did start to put down real roots in the years that followed.

The transformational impact of war

The war years of 1914–18 brought with them an inevitable decline in men playing sport. As women became more active in the labour market, taking to the factory floor as men took to the trenches, opportunities emerged for them to step into the spotlight in sport.

In numerous countries and across a variety of sports, social and exhibition women's games began to emerge. These were almost exclusively to raise funds for the war effort and to offer some social entertainment at such a challenging time, and that made the involvement of women far more palatable to the public.

The women who wanted to play rugby in New Zealand seized their moment.

Many were already well connected to local rugby clubs. Curtin's research highlights that groups like the single and married ladies of the Combined Sports Bodies Committees played at Athletic Park, Wellington, in May 1915, and a match endorsed by the Wellington Rugby Union occurred the same month at half-time of a men's match in June to raise money for the Wounded Sailors and Soldiers Fund.

It was a novelty game, short and entertaining, but, as Ron Palenski points out in his book, *Rugby: A New Zealand History*, it was significant given where it was played. Even more remarkably, it was refereed by a woman too. The whistle was carried by May du Chateau, daughter of 1884 All-Black Harry Roberts and the sister of another, Teddy, who played for his country before and after the First World War. Du Chateau might well be the first ever recorded female referee, a role that only in the past decade has started to see women break through at the highest levels. Similar games were held elsewhere in Wellington, on the West Coast and in other parts of the country.

Meanwhile, there had been some fledgling efforts to get women's rugby started in France, Wales and England, though in the face of public opposition. The women who were trying to play rugby were doing it behind closed doors and, bar scant reporting here and there, there remains a dearth of evidence of what was unfolding in the 1890s in these countries.

Though it was sporadic, there was some interest in the game in England among women, as Col. Philip Trevor in his book *Rugby Football* from 1923 documented. His chapter 'The Game's Popularity – Rugger For Girls' told the story of his daughters asking him to help them with a game they wanted to play in 1913 with friends on the beach. It was a full 15-a-side game of rugby, with more players available if the need arose.

Col. Trevor, who acted as referee, marvelled at the skills of the girls in his book and described how they improvised with kit by wearing bathing hats to lessen the chance of being 'tackled' by their hair.

As it had in New Zealand and later Australia, the First World War also brought opportunities for women to play rugby in Europe. Perhaps the most well-documented game of the time took place at the Cardiff Arms Park on 16 December 1917, when Cardiff Ladies beat Newport Ladies 6-0.

Despite photographs existing of the game, many of the players involved remain anonymous, though academics are seeking to rectify that through continuing research. Records that do exist identify that the Newport players represented the local iron mill firm of John Lysaughts Ltd, while Cardiff Ladies turned out for Wm. Hancock Ltd, the local brewery.

As with almost all matches that took place during the war, the proceeds were donated to charity and this match was played in aid of the 'Comforts Fund' for the men of the Cardiff City Battalion. The choice of this charity made sense because the 16th Battalion Welsh Regiment had close links with Cardiff RFC, not least through many of its personnel, and it's likely that several of the Cardiff Ladies had spouses, partners or brothers serving in the battalion.

The best-known member of the Cardiff team is Maria Lillian Eley, or Maria Evans as she was in 1917. Born on 12 January 1900, she was only 17 when she turned out at full-back against Newport. She lived to the age of 106 and in March 2000, at 100 years old, she was the guest of honour of Cardiff RFC at a match against Caerphilly at the Arms Park, where she was introduced to the crowd.

When asked in an interview with the *Penarth Times* how she accounted for her longevity, she simply replied 'rugby'. Reflecting on her time playing the game, she added:

> We loved it. It was such fun with us all playing together on the pitch, but we had to stop when the men came back from the war, which was a shame. Such great fun we had.

While this game is largely recalled as the most high profile of the era, records kept by the Cardiff Rugby Museum discovered it was not the first time that women had played rugby at the Arms Park. According to a report in the *Western Mail*, there had been an even earlier women's match at the ground, three months before on 29 September 1917. This time, though, there were no Cardiff-based participants. The two teams were 'girl munitions workers from Newport'. As these were termed the 'Wasps' and the 'Whites', it seems likely that the Wasps were wearing the traditional Newport strip of black and amber.

Thousands also reportedly attended the Arms Park to watch this earlier game, which ended in a 3-3 draw. Why this contest involving teams from Newport was held at the Arms Park remains unknown. The two sides are known to have met again in Barry in March 1918 in front of 4,000 spectators, so it is possible that the Arms Park game was one of a series they held around south Wales.

However, until details of any earlier fixture materialise, the Arms Park can still lay claim to being the venue of the first recorded women's rugby match in Europe.

Back in New Zealand, teams began to be established independently and unrelated to the fundraising efforts of the war.

Dr Curtin wrote about another team from the North Island who were photographed. It was formally posed with 17 players lined up in three rows, arms crossed, wearing uniforms of jerseys, shorts and boots. Three male officials from the Horowhenua Rugby Union are also seated in the picture. Assuming the team were dressed to play against an opposition,

the picture indicates that competitive games were now being played more widely.

As the game of rugby became more and more popular in New Zealand, other pioneering women came to the fore. In Wellington, another marvellous woman was stepping up. Phyllis Dawson decided she had had enough of women playing second fiddle to the men's game.

Founding and captaining the Wellington Ladies Rugby Football Club in 1921, Dawson helped organise two 15-a-side matches in the team's first season, and she was hoping for support from the local men's rugby union clubs in 1922.

She attempted to secure a seven-a-side match as a curtain-raiser to a local men's match, but the lack of opposition and lack of support from the local men's clubs, including access to pitches on which to play and practise, curtailed her ambition. As seemed to be the way of the time, she vented her annoyance through local media asking readers:

> Which is better for a band of young girls: to be out in the open air, playing games or sitting in a stuffy drawing room with no other aim in view but to look genteel?

Across the water in Australia a similar story was playing out, but it was rugby league and not rugby union gathering momentum.

In the summer of 1921, two pioneering young women from Sydney, Molly Cane and Nellie Doherty, penned a letter to the NSWRL, the governing body for the sport, asking for support in setting up a women's league.

By June a league was up and running. In September a remarkable crowd of 20,000 gathered to watch Sydney take on Metropolitan, with pictures appearing in the papers showing the huge crowds.

Despite the apparent appetite from the public for women's rugby league, the governing body got cold feet and pressure

from authorities ensured that the women did not play again. Women's rugby of any form disappeared from the record books in Australia until the 1930s, when leagues were established once again in New South Wales.

France join the party

Back in France, an alternative version of rugby was fast becoming popular.

The game was called barette. It had emerged in the 19th century as a football code with varying rules in different parts of France. In some areas of the country the ball or barette was passed by hand, in others a kick, but by the end of the era a version that resembled rugby had become hugely popular.

Dr Furse suggests that after the war a new form of barette emerged. Whereas the original game of barette had been closer to a form of touch, the new barette was a full-contact sport directly adapted from rugby union, the only major difference being that tackles were limited to around the waist, teams were 12-a-side, playing time was shorter and pitch dimensions were slightly smaller.

Perhaps this new version, clearly an implicit form of rugby, was a clever ploy to try to avoid the problems that had befallen similar physical women's sport elsewhere but either way over a short period, it became very popular.

Coached and promoted by former French rugby international André Theuriet and Dr Marie Houdré, a fan and player of the sport, barette received its public debut on 2 April 1922 at the Stade Elisabeth in Paris.

Barette was strongly supported by the Fédération Feminine Sportives de France (FFSF) with leadership from the pioneering Alice Milliat, who was fast becoming one of the most influential figures in the world for championing the involvement of women in sport.

Milliat believed sport offered an opportunity for greater gender equality across society. She wanted the 1924 Olympics to include track and field events for women, but these were considered too physically strenuous by the organising body. In its place she launched the first Women's Olympic Games, held in Paris in 1922, where women competed in events like the 1,000-metre race and shot put.

Her lobbying and organising are widely credited with forcing the inclusion of more women in a broader range of sports in the Olympics and her work will come full circle in 2024, where the third Olympic Games to be held in Paris are on track to include the exact same number of male and female athletes for the first time in Olympic history.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the support from the FFSF, newspapers reporting on the demonstration of barette in 1922 were under no illusions that this was rugby rebranded and many were deeply unsupportive.

Within a few months, the Fédération Française de Rugby (FFR), the organisation set up to run rugby in France, introduced a ban on barette being played on any rugby grounds. It was not dissimilar to the FA ban on women playing football in England the year before, when it was claimed that 'the game of football is quite unsuitable for females and ought not to be encouraged'.

But the Stade Elisabeth was not a rugby ground and the new sport did not fall under the auspices of the FFR, so the game did not disappear despite the ban. If anything, it expanded.

By 1926 there was a national championship with at least nine clubs. When the FFR tried to enforce its ban in 1927, after a barette game was proposed as a curtain-raiser before a men's championship game at Stade Jean-Bouin, there were protests through the media in support of the game by people who had come to admire the perseverance of the players.

The following year the FFR caved. Barette was played before games at Stade Jean-Bouin from 1928, the ground which over 80 years later would host a World Cup Final between England and Canada.

Then, with the sport at its height, reports suddenly all but disappeared from the French press. The financial collapse in the mid-1930s of the FFSF shortly afterwards left the sport on its own.

Despite the media silence, it seems probable that the game did continue away from the media spotlight because, in 1941, it again appeared in record books. This time it was to announce its demise.

Alongside rugby league and women's football, Furse's research tells us that barette was banned by the Vichy French government, a right-wing collective who promoted the values of 'Travail, Famille, Patrie'. Women were encouraged to take a more traditionally feminine role in the home.

Whether barette had disappeared before 1941 anyway or whether this ban was the final blow is impossible to say, but barette did not reappear after the Second World War. It was another 20 years before the next generation, perhaps unaware of what had gone before, would form L'Association de Rugby Feminin (ARF) and women's rugby would be reborn in France.

What is the final significance of barette, apart from another tale of what might have been? Dr Furse picks up the story for us:

> Playing barette was more than the simple act of picking up the ball and running with it; Barette was also a symbol of female physical emancipation. The feminist imperative behind barette may not have impacted upon each individual player, but the activity was discussed in the public sphere as an act of gender-boundary crossing.

The achievements of barette do live on though – Marie Houdré was symbolically the first name in the new French rugby hall of fame in 2019.

The efforts of women like Nita Webbe, Phyllis Dawson and Molly Cane counted for little as the world headed into the Great Depression in the 1930s and the traditional role of women in society was restored. In between the world wars, as men returned to the workplace, women returned to their roles in the home, as wives, daughters and caregivers.

Records and journals suggest that women's rugby, despite considerable early success, faded away before a resurgence in the 1960s when formal leagues and competitions sprang up and women-only unions began to establish themselves in the lead-up to the first Test games in the 1980s.

However, in some pockets, versions of women's rugby continued.

In Australia, women's rugby league continued throughout the 1930s. Pictures exist of teams playing in the New South Wales areas of Tamworth and Armidale; the games ran until halted by the Second World War. Photographs of women's teams also exist from New Zealand from the same period.

There were even some competitive games played in the 1940s. Ron Palenski's book documents a women's match at Carisbrook in Dunedin. The four-team competition appears to be the first documented women's rugby competition in New Zealand. A team called St Kilda won the event over Dunedin North. The *Otago Daily Times* provided a memorable report: 'Some of the players gave the appearance of knowing the general idea of Rugby football, but the majority were more willing than scientific, and the referees could do little about it.'

For all this, the progress that women's rugby had made in a few decades began to falter significantly. Little action, bar informal playing here and there, was recorded until well after the Second World War.