

The Homecoming

The Lionesses
and Beyond

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1

THERE'S A bench on the way to the supermarket from our house. It has a view down to the pedestrian level crossing over the little branch line where one train ambles up and back all day, 20 minutes from terminus to terminus. If you're on the bench when the train approaches the level crossing, you'll hear it hoot to warn pedestrians before you see it. And then it grumbles into view and chugs slowly over the crossing.

But mostly when you sit on the bench, you just see the railway line, and maybe the odd person walking or cycling over the crossing. If it's July, you see a patch of long grass that the council doesn't mow any more, and you see trees, and you hear bird song and the odd car on the road behind you. I sometimes take myself away to sit on the

THE HOMECOMING

bench for a bit of calm, a bit of forest bathing – or the closest to it that the English suburbs can muster: the unmown grass, the stand of sycamores bordered by scrub of blackthorn and hawthorn, and the singing of sparrows and blackbirds in the treetops.

I went to sit there for a spell on Saturday 30 July 2022 because I was experiencing mental overload.

Over the previous three weeks, during one of the hottest English summers on record, the UEFA Women's Euros had played out in Brentford, Wigan, Sheffield, Manchester, Rotherham, Milton Keynes, Southampton and Brighton. England – the Lionesses – had battled and danced their way past all opposition and the next day would see them take on Germany in the showpiece final at Wembley. It was really getting to me.

I'd been to Wembley finals before. I'd been to one only two months previously when Sunderland had beaten Wycombe Wanderers in the League One play-off final. I'd supported Sunderland since childhood but I'd been disenchanted with the men's team over recent years. However, with new

CHAPTER 1

ownership and new leadership, they had beaten Wycombe in that all-important Wembley game. It felt like they were finally beginning to take their first steps back into the light. But what was at stake in that game in May was the future of two clubs. As I sat on the bench that Saturday, I realised that what was at stake at Wembley the next day was the future of an entire sport.

The final represented the opportunity for the dreams that many of us had held for decades to become reality. If the Lionesses won, women's and girls' football in England would be turbo-charged to kick on to a whole new reality, one where it would never again be mocked or marginalised.

Important football finals are moments of definition. They are both end points and beginnings. The stories of all the people who've worked hard to get a team to a final draw together to a single point, like the perspective lines in a Renaissance painting converging to take the eye and the mind to a central area of focus. And then at the final whistle, all these lines split off and dance and dazzle their way into the future.

THE HOMECOMING

On Friday 29 July, the day before I sat on the bench, The FA had put up Jill Scott for the Lionesses' last media conference. At 35 years old, Jill had been an England stalwart for over a decade. She played in the elite game before it was fully professional and, like me, she was an eyewitness to the rise and rise of women's football. Also like me, she was in a contemplative mood, her thoughts turning to all those who'd worked hard without thanks, including 'volunteers that went and helped out their local girls' teams, the ones that are still doing it, the ones that love the game.' Then she looked around the room and said, 'I see reporters in here and I've seen them in here for the past 16 years and they do it for the love of the game. So I hope everybody knows that on Sunday if we are to lift that trophy, they've all got their hand on it as well.' Jill knew. She knew there were myriad individual stories – about effort, about dreaming even when hurt, about keeping going, and most of all about damn hard work – that had brought us to this point.

So there I was on the bench after three weeks of the drama, joy, anxiety, tears, shredded nerves

CHAPTER 1

and ecstasy provided by the Lionesses' journey through these Euros. As I sat there, I felt my own personal history in the game crashing down on me. Memories and moments kept flooding in, hitting me with force. I made a conscious decision to think about my journey in the game, hoping that rehearsing it all now might stop me being overwhelmed by it the next day.

I went back to my seven-year-old self, a young girl growing up in Sunderland in the 1972/73 season in a state of ignorance of what football was. It was something men did. My father and brother went to watch football on Saturday afternoons. My brother and his friends would be out all day playing football. Nothing was ever said about why football was not for girls; it was just assumed and accepted. Yet three football-related things were to happen in close succession around that time and they were to profoundly change my life. I wasn't to know about two of them for many years, but the third happened in May 1973 and it turned out to be my ur-football moment.

Although not Sunderland natives, my family had lived there since Dad's work as a naval architect

THE HOMECOMING

brought us over from Merseyside when I was three. Dad immediately started going to watch Sunderland. At that time, they were languishing at the bottom of the table and were shortly to be relegated to the old Second Division, having once been one of the greats. No one expected much of them, but that season Sunderland's Ian Porterfield scored the only goal of the 1973 FA Cup Final, with the result that Sunderland – the rank outsiders – beat Leeds United, the team who in recent years had swept all before them.

I was seven, and I watched the final at home in Sunderland with my mum (my dad and brother had gone to Wembley). When I saw Porterfield score on TV I had a physical sensation of falling. It was as if a chasm opened and I tumbled down into it, never to climb back out. That chasm was love, and from exactly 3.32pm on 5 May 1973 I've been a football fan and, as we say in County Durham, Sunderland Till I Die.

My father was a man of his times and had never thought his daughter would want to watch football, but he was also happy enough to indulge

CHAPTER 1

his kids in whatever they wanted to do, as long as it wouldn't kill them. When I asked if I could start going to watch Sunderland too, he said 'yes' immediately and without judgement. I'll be grateful for ever. My first steps in my lifelong journey with football were taken.

Looking back, I bemoan that the first day of my Sunderland support was also the greatest. There were to be no more Wembley trips or success of any kind for many years, but I spent every second Saturday happily at Roker Park, comfortable and content in the company of the menfolk in my life. Roker Park was a dump. It was a very romantic dump, but it was a dump. We stood in the uncovered Roker End, often in the corner next to the iron railings that separated it from the Clock Stand. The railings were as high as I was and they had an icy, acidic smell. There were midwinter matches when an easterly wind would whip in glacial showers from the North Sea. But I always felt warm.

This was both a physical warmth from the proximity of bodies around us and a psychological

THE HOMECOMING

warmth, a safety. And it has to be said: the reason I felt so psychologically safe was because I was surrounded by men. Even though I never spotted another young girl, and few adult women, never once did I feel this was an alien environment. I was tolerated, welcomed even. In this place, we were all equal, united as a family by our love of Sunderland AFC. And yet this was a place where men were to be found and women, largely, were not. I could not understand this. Football was wonderful: it was dramatic, it was exciting, it was comradely. Why didn't everyone do it? Well, welcome to the patriarchy, baby girl.

We watched men's football at Roker Park, of course. I cannot remember ever in my childhood being aware that such a thing as women's football existed. But exist it did, albeit as a shadow of its former self. It had been hugely popular as a spectator sport during and immediately after the First World War. In the early 1920s The FA – the national governing body for the game – suppressed women's football by stopping it being played on grounds belonging to FA-affiliated clubs. This had

CHAPTER 1

the desired effect, and a sport that had attracted crowds of tens of thousands was bullied into utter retreat.

It didn't die completely but it wasn't a proper, organised thing for many more years. What's more, the decades-long suppression of the game by The FA enabled a toxic culture to build up whereby any female involvement in the game was ridiculed and abused. In the junior school playground, I wasn't believed when I said I'd been at Roker Park the previous Saturday. I had to run through the team and the key moments of the match before there'd be a reluctant shrug of acceptance. It was an early lesson that women often have to work harder to prove themselves.

I mentioned that there were two other things that happened around this time. First, The FA lifted the ban on women playing at FA-affiliated grounds almost 50 long years after imposing it. A new age began – but for your average English primary schoolgirl of the time, it began with a whimper. Was there a rush to ensure girls and women could play? No.

THE HOMECOMING

The second thing happened in June 1972 on the other side of the Atlantic, and I wasn't to find out about it for many years.

For now, my young football life focused on going to games with Dad and my brother. But there came a rupture of the worst kind. My father was diagnosed with Motor Neurone Disease when I was 11. Lots of things stopped, including the three of us going to watch football. For two years I watched my hero die a little bit more each day. In June 1979, he went to Matfen Hall in Northumberland, then a care home, to give my mother, his full-time carer, some respite. The ambulance collected him on the Monday. He died on the Tuesday.

It was the start of a world that was different, and I wasn't given a map to navigate it. My mother fell ill with what was then called a nervous breakdown. She eventually recovered, but I effectively had to self-parent during my early teens. School saved me to an extent. At a time when my world was out of control, I found I could control studying. It never felt like work – rather, I enjoyed it enormously. What's more, I was good at it and

CHAPTER 1

got good results. But I was stumbling about in pain, my excellent school results misguidedly reassuring every responsible adult that I was ‘fine’ and ‘coming through it well’.

When bereavement is breaking you, you’ll try anything. One Saturday when I was about 15, I was meandering around the house, broken and lonely. Mum was having a bad day and not up to doing anything. I picked up the paper and saw that Sunderland were playing at home. *What the hell*, I thought, and I set off.

The direct walk to Roker Park from our house took about 40 minutes. The indirect way, which took about an hour, is one of the most beautiful walks I know. It starts with a climb up to the top of Cleadon Hills, a magnesian limestone escarpment and a landscape not quite like any other in England. The escarpment’s topped with soft grass where harebells and cowslips nod, while overhead the sky rings with lark song. From the top, the whole of God’s great North-East of England opens out before you: 30-odd miles to the south, the North Yorkshire Moors; far in the north, the Cheviots; in between,

THE HOMECOMING

the great river plains of Tyne, Wear and Tees and the cities they support. And to the east – the sea.

It's to the sea that I'd head, following the path to Whitburn, an ancient and delightful coastal village, typical of County Durham villages with its Front Street of stone cottages and its huge village green. From here, the walk was along the golden mile of beach that so inspired the painter L.S. Lowry. At the farthest end of the beach, you'd cut up through the original Roker Park, a Victorian pleasure ground with bandstand, bowling greens and boating lake. Then you'd come out of the park, round a corner and see the floodlights of the football ground. Floodlights mounted on four tall pylons, one at each corner of the ground, have now all but disappeared, but back then they were a familiar and comforting part of every cityscape.

The first sight of the Roker Park floodlights on matchday always gave me a tug of excitement, on this day as much as on any other. I went in the Roker End, where we'd always gone. I can't remember the match or the score but I remember it was a sunny day late in the season and that I looked around

CHAPTER 1

trying to find Dad. He wasn't entirely absent: call it memory, call it presence, call it a ghost, but something of him was there.

Other things were still most definitely and concretely there: the crowd of mostly men and their intense focus – sometimes agonised, sometimes ecstatic – on the match being played out before them; the tinny tannoy; the smell of the iron railings, the cigarettes being smoked all around, and a freshness blowing in from the sea while gulls cried overhead. I soon found I was engrossed in the match, but most of all I had overwhelming feelings of belonging and of safety – the epitome of being at home.

Over the next few years, I became something of a Roker regular again. Not every match, sometimes just the odd match, and always alone, football fandom for girls still being something of a minority pursuit. Eventually another rupture with Sunderland AFC came, this time because Cambridge beckoned when I left school.

Before Cambridge there was a trip to study at an American boarding school for six months

THE HOMECOMING

as a result of being awarded an English-Speaking Union scholarship. The USA was further than I had ever travelled and the prospect of the trip was both exhilarating and daunting. Talking to some Americans in the London hotel where my mother and I stayed the night before my flight from Heathrow, we told them the school was called Choate Rosemary Hall. The Americans went silent. Mum and I side-eyed each other. Eventually, the American lady said, 'You do know that's the school John F. Kennedy went to?' No, we had no idea. We knew nothing about this school. It was 1985, the internet was ten years away, and we'd had no means of finding out. And before we could digest properly what we'd just learned, I was away on the flight to New York.

What an adventure. Choate Rosemary Hall was the epitome of privileged secondary education in the USA and I had never seen anything like it. I had never met people from the backgrounds some of these people were from: fabulously, globally wealthy. Most of them tended to wear it fairly lightly. You can tell what class a British person

CHAPTER 1

wants you to think they are from the way they speak but also from other markers such as how they dress. The same is true of Americans but not to the same extent.

I found an open-hearted, can-do approach to life and a generosity of spirit that made the British seem crabbed. This generosity expressed itself in myriad kindnesses to me from my schoolmates and their families, and I came to have the deepest respect for the United States. Not everything was perfect: I remember being staggered by some of the poverty I saw outside the ivied precincts of Choate, and when I travelled to some of the big cities I remember being shocked by the extent to which poor areas correlated to Black areas.

But back in the ivied precincts of Choate, I saw that it had better sports facilities than many British universities. Every sport was played and for a lot of the students and faculty sport was an obsession. ‘Ah, you British, it must be wonderful to play your tennis on grass,’ one teacher said to me. *Mate*, I thought, *I’m from a shipbuilding family in Sunderland – yes, a middle-class one, but still.*

THE HOMECOMING

But Choate was to blow my brain for footballing reasons: it had a girls' soccer team. Not only that, but the team played in a well-established league. I was astounded. *How did ... how come ... there's girls playing football? And it's normal? Nobody thinks they're weird?* Then one day the girls' soccer coach came up to me and said, 'Hey, you're British, I guess you play. Do you fancy a try-out?'

How on earth could this be? The answer was that thing that had happened in the USA in June 1972. It was a piece of legislation called Title IX, which banned discrimination in any education programmes receiving federal assistance. It had the effect of huge new funding streams becoming available to girls' and women's school and college sport. All that money needed something to spend itself on and along came soccer, as our American friends call it. Without all the ridiculous cultural baggage about the game's unsuitability for females that burdened it in its home country, it met its American destiny. And so here I was, 13 years after Title IX was enacted, being asked to play football. I was being asked to play football!

CHAPTER 1

I had to look at the coach and reply, 'I'm terribly sorry, but I've never kicked a ball.'

Rage entered my soul. How come I had never kicked a ball? Why had my country let me down in this way? Back home in Britain, we talked of football as our national sport but this was nonsense if only half the population could play. I brought a lot of things home from my six months in America, and this deep anger with my country was one of the most important. I felt that in denying me football, it had let me down. It was holding me back.

But I wasn't a child any more. There was something I could do about it. When I started at Clare College, Cambridge in the autumn of 1985, despite having still never kicked a ball, I set up Clare's first-ever women's football team in its 600 years of history. Thus a little rivulet of the huge tide of change that was Title IX flowed back to old England. I like to think the college's 14th-century founder, Lady Elizabeth de Clare, wouldn't entirely have disapproved.

I got the team together for our first match against one of the other colleges by cajoling people

THE HOMECOMING

in the bar. No one had played before and everyone was a bit scared. ‘Oh you won’t want me, I’ll be no good,’ said almost all of them, but somehow I persuaded 11 players to rock up for the game. I think we lost 10-0, but each one of us came off the pitch saying, ‘That was wonderful, when’s the next game?’

We lost the next game about 6-0, but things began to improve. After one match we were down in the college bar, high as kites. ‘Oh, did you win?’ asked one of the blokes. ‘No, we lost 2-0!’ I replied. It was a defeat, but it felt like a proper football score, not a netball score. We played on. Eventually we started scoring goals – and oh, the ecstasy!

How was all this received in Clare College? Just fine. In 1972 it had become one of the first three all-male colleges to admit women students. It was widely seen as liberal and progressive. The general ambience around the place was that academic life was important, but outside that nobody was too bothered what you did, although it was nice if you did it well.

CHAPTER 1

There are things that I've experienced for the first time as an adult that have given me a sense of utter wonder, things that younger generations will take for granted. Having a real-time email conversation with someone in Chile. Seeing red kites, the glorious bird of prey reintroduced at the turn of the century, soaring in English skies. And playing football.

My god, what a revelation it was. Football is quite simply the greatest and most enjoyable game it is possible to play. It demands everything of the athlete: ideally you have to be fit, fast and flexible; you have to be skilful as an individual but you also have to play as a team. It's a tactical game that makes you think, but it isn't bogged down by strategy. Every part of you – mind and body – is exercised, worked out and brought alive. I absolutely loved it. It felt so freeing and glorious to charge around a pitch in the sharp, damp, English autumn air. Then there was the basic, atavistic pleasure of one's relationship with the ball: feeling its responses to your touch and beginning to understand how to control it. After a

THE HOMECOMING

while came the enormous pleasure when it began to click with my team-mates – passing a ball into space for them to run on to, or being the last woman in defence before the keeper and getting in the vital tackle.

There was something else too, something that is perhaps unique to women: suddenly, and for the first time in my life, I had permission to be aggressive. For many young women of my generation, even though feminism had done so much to change the world, any sign of being combative or sometimes even just assertive would be squashed flat. Aggression (properly used, within the Laws of the Game) isn't just desirable in football, it's essential. You're face to face with opponents. You can't walk away. Allowing my assertiveness to flow on the football pitch was one of the greatest revelations I have ever experienced.

I really, really wasn't very good. That's not false modesty, it's a cool-headed self-assessment. But I kept playing after Cambridge, first as a post-grad at Northumbria University and then in the law firm where I worked as a trainee solicitor. In both

CHAPTER 1

these places I set up teams. As a mediocre female player in the early 1990s, it was the only way to play. Each time I had that experience of rounding up a group of women who, bar one or two exceptions, hadn't played before. Each time I asked someone, the answer would invariably be the same as I'd got at Cambridge: 'You won't want me, I won't be very good.' It was rare that a woman simply said, 'Yes.' But for those who said I wouldn't want them, I also saw the shine in their eyes that suggested they really, really wanted to give it a go but couldn't allow themselves to say so. I'd persuade, pressure, cajole and reassure, and eventually get my teams together. And every time they came off the pitch smiling and wanting to play again.

In the country at large, women's football was at long last beginning to be a thing again. A Women's Football Association had been established, and by the mid-1980s there was an England team. When I moved to London after university, there was an embryonic set-up under the auspices of Arsenal FC. I even went along to one of its training sessions but I was totally outclassed.

THE HOMECOMING

Reactions to the fact that I played football fell along a spectrum. Some people, particularly at Cambridge and in the world of fanzines and fan culture in which I grew increasingly involved, were extremely supportive. Others expressed amused curiosity and slight disbelief. It was always, always a talking point. I came to expect it to be the one thing that would be picked out of my CV for discussion at job interviews. And then there was the downright hostility, invariably accompanied by one or both of the Two Hostile Questions. Hostile Question Number One was: are you all lesbians? Hostile Question Number Two was: do you all swap shirts at the end? (But hey, it's just banter, right?)

Throughout my twenties there was still Sunderland AFC. I went to see them whenever I could. In my final year at Cambridge, there was joy as manager Denis Smith lifted the club out of the old Third Division. His tenure brought some good players in, and it began to be a real pleasure to go and see them. I chose Northumbria University for post-grad so that I could get a season ticket at Roker Park. Sunderland's fortunes were mixed, but in

CHAPTER 1

1992 – the year I took my Law Society final exams – they got to the FA Cup Final for the first time since 1973. OK, we lost, but what a season to have a season ticket. The quarter-final replay against Chelsea at Roker Park is a game that those who were there still talk about. I wasn't to experience a game like it for intensity, anxiety and emotion until 31 July 2022.

* * *

My football team was on the up and I was playing (albeit intermittently and only when I could be bothered to set a team up). One evening an idea came to me in a flash when I was having dinner with my family: 'I'm going to set up a fanzine about women in football.' That was it. No brainstorming, no concept designing, no consultations, no thinking about it. I knew immediately that it was a great idea. Thus 'Born Kicking', my contribution to the cutting edge of 1990s football subculture, was born. It badged itself as the fanzine for women who loved football, whether as players or fans and,

THE HOMECOMING

if as fans, whether of the male or female game. It ran for four issues, it sold a few hundred copies, it barely covered its costs, and I had to end it because I couldn't run it and do those wretched Law Society final exams and I couldn't find anyone to take it over. But while I ran it, it was a laugh and it got me a bit of prominence as women who knew anything about football were thin on the ground. In later years, I just thought of it as this daft studenty thing I once did and I kind of forgot about it.

I recently reread it for the first time in thirty years. Now, I'm pretty sure it was the first football fanzine in the world for women in football. It was scrappy, it was homemade, you can see the Tippex lines on its photocopied pages, but I wouldn't change one word of Issue One's opening editorial, written in September 1990:

Football is the People's Game. This is both a truth and a truism. A truth, because without doubt football is as an intrinsic and important part of our everyday British culture as the royal family, the pub and

CHAPTER 1

the double-decker bus. A truism, because it's a phrase that people glibly trot out without really thinking what it means. Another often heard cliché is 'football is a man's game'. These two statements cannot exist side by side. We believe that football is genuinely and fundamentally by the people and for the people, *all* the people, women as much as men.

I'm now partly proud of 'Born Kicking', partly mortally embarrassed by it. I'm proud of setting out the stall for women in football, for making the case that it ought to be our game too. I'm proud that, among other articles, I interviewed Linda Whitehead (secretary of the Women's Football Association), Martin Regan (England manager), and Kerry Davies (who played for England and semi-professionally in Italy). I'm proud and exceptionally grateful that many other women, and some men, contributed enthusiastically by writing articles and creating artwork, and I thank them again, after all this time, from the bottom

THE HOMECOMING

of my heart. I'm proud that 'Born Kicking' had a regular 'What the Sexists Say' feature (step up Brian Glanville: 'Women's football is a game that should only be played by consenting adults in private' – Brian, I'm proud that we named and shamed you).

But I'm also embarrassed by some of it, such as the kicking I gave the football bodies, particularly The FA. Some of my writing was naive and uninformed. Having said that, some of what I called for then is as relevant now. Spend money, I argued, on 'the provision of basic things like coaches and pitches'. And then there was this about the new elite national league that was due to start in 1991:

The question arises of how [the national league] is going to be paid for. The Women's Football Association has limited resources and cannot be expected to fund it all itself, and at the moment is trying to look round for some kind of blue-chip sugar daddy to foot the bill. Where is Barclays now?