



Carrie Dunn

THE
REIGN
OF THE LIONESSES

How European Glory Changed
Women's Football in England

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SUMMER

Retention

ELLEN WHITE, born in 1989, would have been too young to remember Channel 4 showing women's football. Early in her career, she had talked about her parents and her brother being her role models when she was small. Indeed, it was her father who set her on the road to footballing stardom, signing her up to the 'Mini Ducks' kids' programme he ran in their home town of Aylesbury. In terms of players who inspired her, though, she often mentioned two England legends, both men: Gary Lineker, for the sheer number of goals he scored, and David Beckham, for his professionalism on and off the field.

For many of the female players of White's generation, the first real awareness they had of the possibility of playing professional football was watching the movie *Bend It Like Beckham*, released in 2002. Even then, the plot focused on the very best female talent having the opportunity to move to America and pursue a footballing career there; there was still no chance of it happening in England.

White visited the USA as a child, and had the opportunity to meet England star Kelly Smith, then

playing for Philadelphia Charge. That was the first genuine realisation she had that she – a girl living in an English town – could play elite football and represent her country. White and Smith later became team-mates for club and country; and it was Smith who set the England goalscoring record that White later claimed.

Having her face plastered all over the front page of a newspaper, though, was something White was used to at an early age. As a nine-year-old in September 1998, she discovered that she was no longer allowed to play alongside boys in their local league, the Chiltern Youth League. The local newspaper, the *Bucks Herald*, covered the story with the headline ‘Soccer girl banned by league for boys’, and reported that she had scored over 100 goals in the season before. FA rules, the newspaper declared, allowed for mixed football up to and including the age of ten, but the local league said that girls were not allowed in what they saw as a boys-only competition. The photos of White accompanying the news story were of her in full Arsenal kit; she was already captaining their under-11 side.

Twenty-four years later, White announced her retirement from football as a newly crowned European champion. After 113 international caps and 52 goals, plus two Women’s Super League titles, three Women’s FA Cups and countless more honours, she had concluded that all her dreams had come true on 31 July.

‘This has been one of the hardest decisions of my life but one that I know is the right decision for me,’ she wrote in a statement she released on social media. ‘This decision has always been one I have wanted to make on my terms.

And this is my time to say goodbye to football and watch the next generation shine. It has been my greatest honour and privilege to play this game. In particular playing for England has and always will be the greatest gift.'

Stepping back from international football after winning the biggest prize of her career was perhaps something observers expected from the 33-year-old; retiring from club football was more of a shock. A few days later, she revealed that her decision had been hastened by suffering a punctured lung in 2021, when she was receiving acupuncture for her long-standing back problem. Remarkably, she had recovered, returned to full fitness, and got back into the England squad without a word of it leaking to the press. She told the media that she had gone into the Euros knowing full well that it was her last hurrah, and that she would be announcing her retirement afterwards.

'It was a lot for me to have to go through and a big reason that accelerated my want to retire,' she told the BBC a few days afterwards.

The next major retirement was even more of a surprise, in a way. Jill Scott – two years White's senior – had been utterly dedicated to her England career. Finding herself out of the Manchester City first team, she opted to spend time out on loan at Everton and then Aston Villa, ensuring she was match fit and available for selection for both the 2021 Olympic Games and then the Euros. Her presence was the tangible thread connecting the current generation with the previous ones; she had played in the 2007 Women's World Cup, when her 2022 Lionesses squad-mate Hannah Hampton, 14 years her junior, was still in primary school.

She finished her career as England's second-most-capped player – and announced her departure in a way that truly suited her personality, in a first-person essay published on 'The Players' Tribune' website that completely captured her voice and style of speech. She reiterated throughout that she had promised herself that she would not cry when she finally bade football farewell, but the reaction from readers indicated that plenty of them shed more than a few tears reading her emotional love letter to the game that gave her so much. She admitted that when she was called into Sarina Wiegman's office to find out whether or not she had made the 2022 squad, she was shaking, explaining: 'I knew it was my last go. I just wanted to give absolutely everything I had left to this team, no matter what that meant.'

Scott did not start any of England's matches during the Euros, but she remained a crucial part of the squad. She came on as a substitute in the second group game, for the last ten minutes; in the quarter-final, for the last four minutes of extra time; in the semi-final, for the last four minutes of the match; and in the final, in the last minute of normal time. Altogether it might have totalled only a handful of minutes, but they were crucial ones; under pressure, with the Lionesses needing to hold on to a result, it was Scott who was called on, ever reliable, able to adapt and hold her nerve. Her departure truly marked the end of an era.

* * *

More than a decade since the launch of the Women's Super League, one of their aims was starting to look just a little bit wobbly. They had intended to make the league the most

attractive domestic competition in the world, retaining English talent. It was a step meant to prevent a brain-drain that had become all too common in the women's game, with players stepping up to the senior set-up and then immediately heading over to the USA, where they were able to gain a college education as well as play football at a very high level. Some of the younger Lionesses had taken that route: Lotte Wubben-Moy and Alessia Russo both played for the North Carolina Tar Heels, for example.

But as leagues around Europe began to raise their game – wanting more competition to improve their Women's Champions League performances and in turn their national team – they also became more and more alluring. Of course, with England players now elevated to bona fide superstardom, the giants of European football were interested in adding them to their squads, and perhaps this was not just for their skill on the pitch but for their name value and the opportunities for off-field branding and merchandising they would bring. Georgia Stanway headed to Bayern Munich, Lucy Bronze and Keira Walsh both to Barcelona.

The Spanish league had been particularly notable for its development in recent years as the big hitters of the men's game started to plough money into the women's teams. Barcelona had already won the Women's Champions League in 2020/21, and were collating a team of international superstars – not just Bronze and Walsh but Norway's Ingrid Engen and Caroline Graham Hansen and Nigeria's Asisat Oshoala, for example, as well as Spanish talent such as Sandra Panos, Mapi Leon and the much-celebrated Alexia

Putellas, Ballon d'Or winner and FIFA's Best Female Player of 2021.

They were also bringing fans into the stands. In 2021/22, they faced Real Madrid in the quarter-finals of the Champions League, with 91,552 fans at the home leg, the second match of the tie, and then Wolfsburg in the semi-final, watched by 91,648 in the first leg at Camp Nou. Inevitably, these figures caused a great deal of excitement, with many asserting that these were the biggest-ever attendances for any women's football match; this was likely a well-intentioned exaggeration due to a lack of awareness about the unofficial Women's World Cup in 1971, where matches packed out the Azteca Stadium in Mexico, with a capacity of around 110,000 at that point.

The Lionesses could certainly command audiences of that size, if such stadia were available to them, but in the Women's Super League matters were on a somewhat smaller scale. WSL teams continued, in the main, to play at smaller grounds, with the occasional 'big match' at their parent men's ground; Manchester United Women, who usually played their home matches at Leigh Sports Village, had already announced that they would be playing Aston Villa at Old Trafford in December, when the men's season was on hiatus due to the scheduling of the winter World Cup in Qatar; Liverpool were permitted to play at Anfield when they were due to host Everton in the last weekend of September.

That was also the weekend when Arsenal would be playing at the Emirates Stadium against their north London rivals Tottenham Hotspur. At the start of September, the

match already looked likely to break all WSL attendance records. Gunners manager Jonas Eidevall, however, was adamant that playing in the Emirates Stadium was not a stunt, but a viable step forward for women's football – something that could happen more regularly, and was something that the customer base was demanding, not just a fun gimmick to attract casually interested passers-by, wanting to be part of an exciting occasion. At the same time, he was very careful to highlight the Gunners' track record as a pioneer club for the women's game, paying tribute to the work done by coaches and players of previous generations.

'Remember it's 50,000 sold tickets,' Eidevall said to the media, emphasising the commercial benefit of putting a women's match in a bigger stadium – more tickets could be sold, meaning more income generated for the club. 'It's not giveaways, it's not sold for a discounted price; it's sold tickets. I think that's really, really special because that means doing this, the way the club has done it, it's sustainable. It shows that the interest there is for real.'

'The investment that we as a team, the club has done, but also the past generations, the teams before us have done to put us on to this stage here, that's phenomenal. We feel that, and of course we want to go out, and we want to make the most of it so it can happen again more frequently.'

Intriguingly, Eidevall cast his eyes wider. He pointed out to the press that the clubs in the top echelons of European football were those who were part of big set-ups led by successful men's clubs; he reminded them that when Arsenal won what is now the Women's Champions League,

independent clubs for women, such as Sweden's Umea or Germany's Turbine Potsdam, were competing for the crown.

'Today, when you look at the clubs going into the quarter-finals of the Champions League, there are no women's-only clubs left,' he said. 'They are all clubs who have top teams in men's football.'

'But what you have to see there is that there is only one consistent member and that's Arsenal. That's class and that's history and that is something that you can never change. You were a first mover, you were a believer before everyone else.'

'That is something the club and all the fans should be very, very proud of.'

It was an interesting observation. Many football governing bodies around the world have in recent years encouraged their men's clubs – particularly at the top end of the game – to take women's football within their remit, and provide financial support as well as infrastructure. The idea is that a long-established men's club acts almost as a guarantor for the women's team, still essentially in its infancy after so many years of the game's growth being deliberately stunted or ignored. The prize money in men's football is greater than that on offer to women, by some degree; of course, the salaries on offer in the men's game are also much greater than those in the women's game, as are the advertising endorsements. Women's football is only now beginning to understand the true commercial power it might hold.

For the 2022/23 season, the FA and lead sponsor Vitality announced an impressive increase to the Women's FA Cup prize fund. From a pot swelled to £3 million, a

club who lost in the first round of qualifying would still pick up £450, with a team losing in the first round proper getting a little solace with £1,500, and the eventual winners earning £100,000. Such sums might, of course, raise an eyebrow within the men's game, where the money on offer in 2022/23 for the two finalists in the Emirates FA Cup alone totalled £3 million, but it would be worth remembering that just the season before, the women's cup winners collected just £25,000.

The inequalities between the men's and women's sides of the game have often been a topic of conversation among fans and pundits. Some might argue that explicit comparisons of the two are not entirely helpful; with women's football essentially banned up until the 1970s, and with even more social and cultural barriers to break after the explicit prohibition was lifted, there remains much work to be done to give the women's game the soundest of structures at all levels, just as the men have.

As the clock ticked down to the start of the women's domestic season, a familiar rumour began to circulate – that the Premier League, the operators of the men's top tier of professional football, were interested in taking over the Women's Super League as well.

The Premier League's chief executive Richard Masters confirmed to journalists that they were 'in active conversations' about how they could help the women's and girls' game more, in addition to their new offer of funding to the tune of £21 million, split between grassroots and professional football. He avoided any discussion of an outright WSL takeover but it had been raised many times

previously – most notably and most recently by the former Arsenal striker Ian Wright, now a regular TV pundit for women's matches, who had mentioned it after the Lionesses' Euro triumph.

Indeed, Masters himself had broached the possibility two summers previously, when he told the parliamentary select committee for digital culture, media and sport that he would like to see it happen.

He – and others in the men's game – may have been surprised by the lack of enthusiasm his remarks engendered among those in the women's game, which could explain his more circumspect approach in 2022. There had been a great deal of disquiet among those at WSL clubs, concerned that they would find themselves facing some big problems if the Premier League were in charge. With women's professional football in England still in its relative infancy, there were concerns that its sustainability had yet to be guaranteed; coach and player development for women is still relatively new, with many young players still pursuing tertiary education in a way that their male peers do not. Some within the women's game worried that if the Premier League took over, they would simply roll out their existing structures without taking the time and effort to invest in the unique needs and challenges that were still in existence.

Other observers were concerned that a Premier League takeover would ultimately lead to the top two tiers of women's football simply reflecting the men's game. By 2022, the WSL had what was colloquially referred to as a 'Big Four' – Arsenal, Chelsea, Manchester City and Manchester United – the quartet are all, of course, linked to massive

and financially rich men's clubs. However, at the start of the WSL, when the geographical spread of teams was an important criterion, as was a spread of talent to ensure competition, the league also included Doncaster Rovers Belles, Bristol Academy and Lincoln (later Notts County, who folded in 2017 a few days before the start of the Spring Series competition). The loss of so-called smaller clubs from the top tier was perhaps inevitable in the push towards professionalisation, with only the biggest and richest clubs able to afford the wages and facilities.

However, the Championship – the second tier – continued to boast some names that would not be familiar to an onlooker who followed only the men's game: for example, Coventry United, Durham Women, and Lewes. The semi-professional status of the league meant that independent women's teams or those less well-off or those with a different structure to the traditional football club were all able to thrive, competing against the typically big names so well known from their exploits in the men's game.

Lewes, in Sussex, had grabbed plenty of press attention for their commitment to equal pay for their men's and women's teams. Certain elements of the media have been fond of trying to stir up controversy by asking female players if they thought they deserved the same salaries as their male counterparts; Lewes's decision, made publicly, eliminated such questions from the discussion around their squad, at least. Their pay equality might have been an eye-catching policy, but as their CEO Maggie Murphy explained, it was simply a manifestation of the way in which they were building a new, different style of football club. They were

preparing to hold elections to the club's board, with three vacancies to serve for three years – an unusual way for a football club to govern itself.

‘People always want to jump to the money straight away,’ said Murphy, ‘and what I try to say is that it’s actually really about equal decision-making, and everything else falls in with trying to build an ethical, community-oriented, transparent, well-governed football club. When you try to do that, then equality follows suit, and that’s why we split our pay equally, because we think it’s the right thing to do for our community and for the world.’