

David J Williamson, *Belles of the Ball*. R & D Associates, Devon, 1991. Illus., pp. 100.

As the author himself points out, his book ‘has not been written with the intent of being a heavy historical tome for academics’. For all that, this small contribution has a fascinating and little-known story to tell, and is a most worthy addition to the literature on women in sport.

The book recounts the emergence of football (soccer) in the British Isles from the early eighteenth century, though this section is sketchy and undocumented. It fundamentally focuses on World War I and the post-War period when, through necessity, women worked in the factories and the fields in the absence of men. The resultant camaraderie of this increase in females in the work-place and their changing role in society provided a perfect catalyst for change. Distractions were required, and some women took to the football fields. The factories, in particular, spawned such teams, and the major direction taken by these early teams was to raise money for charity.

Originally, important help came from the Football Association (FA), and by 1920 places like Stamford Bridge, White Hart Lane and Goodison Park were packed to watch women playing for a good cause. The number of female teams increased rapidly and, by 1921, ‘it was as if the country had been gripped by ladies’ football’ (p. 15).

Dick Kerr’s, a munitions factory, invited a French representative side as early as 1920, and they themselves toured the same year. Dick Kerr’s became the top national side and, in 1920, played thirty games, winning twenty-five and drawing two. They drew 6000 at Glasgow, 23 000 at Edinburgh, 20 000 at Hull, 18 000 at Cardiff, and incredibly 53 000 at Everton.

Their success rattled the male bastion of the sport, and the men’s professional governing body, the Football Association, reacted against the women’s game. It must be understood that the games, for charity, were

being held on FA grounds. Rumours spread that the gate receipts for charity were being misused, but there is no actual evidence that this was the case.

On 5 December 1921 the death-knell of the women's game in the 1920s was sounded when the Association's Consultative Committee passed the following motion:

5. Women's Football Matches. The Following Resolution was adopted:

Complaints having been made as to football being played by women. Council felt impelled to express their strong opinion that the game of football is quite unsuitable for females and should not be encouraged.

Complaints have also been made as to the conditions under which some of the matches have been arranged and played, and the appropriation of receipts to other than charitable objects. The Council are further of the opinion that an excessive proportion of the receipts are absorbed in expenses and an inadequate percentage devoted to charitable objects.

For these reasons the Clubs belonging to the Association refuse the use of their grounds for such matches.

Who made any such complaints remains a mystery to this day, and no case was ever presented that funds were misused. Perhaps the crux of the matter had to do with the male guardians objecting to women playing. Effectively the women were now stranded, as they could not play on FA grounds.

The women put on a brave face, and even formed their own Association, the English Ladies Football Association, in December 1921. They opted for a lighter ball, a shortened field and the use of hands to protect themselves. More and more they found themselves in a hopeless position. By 1922 their glory days were gone. It is ironic that in England, the country that pioneered the modernisation of football, prejudice

abounded to stop the growth of the game for half its population. The dream of women playing the game of soccer was hit on the head, so much so that in schools in England playing soccer by women was thereafter frowned upon.

The late 1960s has seen the formation of the Women's Football Association of England, and the game for women is making a comeback. Unbelievably there is still a ban on clubs affiliated with the FA allowing the use of their grounds for women's football, and not only that a ban is in effect to prevent any of their staff taking part in a game with or against ladies.

Prejudice against women by sporting bodies is certainly not new, and this case study highlights the efforts made to prevent women playing the sport of football. In the long run such prejudicial behaviour will be defeated, because women have the same rights as men to play sport for enjoyment as well as for competitive reasons. Right will ultimately win out.

Reet Howell

[This is the last written contribution by Dr Reet Howell. She read this book and penned these words though she was dying tragically of cancer. Ever an advocate of women's sport, and ever determined to fight prejudice and bias against women in any domain, it is fitting that her last written words were about discrimination. Her book, *Her Story in Sport*, and many speeches and articles, will ever stand as testimony to her contribution. - M Howell]