



Women's football: The game is finally reaping the commercial success it deserves

OPINION

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With just days to go before the Women's World Cup kicks off in Paris, there is talk about the tournament reaching a billion viewers and being the biggest sporting event in 2019. That's bigger than the Cricket and Rugby World Cups as well as bigger than Wimbledon and the Tour de France. Far-fetched? I think not.

Women's football is finally getting the attention it rightly deserves. So much has been said in the past about a lack of genuine interest from spectators, sponsors and the media. No more! Atletico Madrid and Barcelona recently drew a world-record crowd of 60,739 for a women's football match, followed a week later by another record, this time in Italy, where Juventus ladies welcomed 39,000 for their match against Fiorentina. While this hasn't

changed women's football overnight, it was a clear demonstration of the appetite which exists for the sport.

It's crazy to think that it wasn't that long ago the English FA banned women from using its facilities and only 15 years since the former president of FIFA, Sepp Blatter, suggested that the best way to make the game more popular was for the women to wear tighter shorts. You couldn't make this stuff up.

Brands and media owners, the two stakeholders without which it's impossible to grow the sport, are finally getting involved in a truly transformative way. VISA has taken advantage of UEFA's decision to unbundle the rights to women's football (another important move) to sign a ground-breaking seven-year deal to become the first-ever sponsor of UEFA women's football. The significance of this cannot be over-stated.

When one of the world's biggest blue-chip companies makes a long term and substantial financial commitment to something, it sends a message of where they see the space going. It's no surprise that this was followed by a similar move by Nike and more recently by Barclays and Boots in the UK, to invest in the game across all levels. In a world where everything is becoming commoditised and people are inundated with advertising, brands understand that standing out is about communicating more than product and price.

It's about what you believe and how you influence culture because increasingly people's consumption is a statement of their beliefs. All things being equal, they want to know that a brand they engage with and buy from is active in making their world a better place. VISA, Nike, Barclays and Boots understand that investing in a world that produces more fit, healthy, confident and empowered women is good for their business.

Consumers will relate to that narrative and employees will feel more attracted to being part of those organisations. Growing up in the United States, I had a unique opportunity to witness the power of women's football on wider culture and particularly on young girls. I've seen first-hand what happens when girls can compete all through their childhood, adolescence and university while having role models like Mia Hamm, Abby Wambach, Alex Morgan and Megan Rapinoe, to name a few. When they watch these women perform at the

highest level, they see reflections of themselves and can believe that achieving those or other heights is within their reach. They grow up more confident and better equipped to take on any of life's personal and professional challenges.

The U.S. women's national team is more than an excellent women's team – their ability transcends gender. I've seen bars packed with men wearing T-shirts emblazoned with the names of players from the women's national team. If that's not a sign of the sport's appeal, I don't know what is. The World Cup final in 2015, in which the USA beat Japan, had the highest TV audience of all time for any soccer game in the U.S. No, not just the highest audience for a women's game – any football game, ever!

The challenge, until recently, was to use those opportunities to create ongoing media coverage and attract sponsorship to provide the sport with the platform to grow. At MediaCom, we felt strongly about the potential that women's sport offered to society and wanted to use our position at the cross-section of media, advertising and talent to drive meaningful change. After all, so much of our agency's success can be attributed to diversity and gender equality at all levels of our organisation.

We started by signing England international Eni Aluko, with the aim of telling her incredible story through brand partnerships, media and philanthropy. Here was a young woman from an immigrant family whose only path to the top of her sport was to play with boys while enduring constant ridicule. Not only did she go on to represent her country over 100 times at some of the biggest competitions in the world, including the Olympics and World Cup, she did so while finishing first in her law class and building a successful media career.

We worked with Eni to develop groundbreaking partnerships with Under Armour, UN Women and Sally Hansen, where she featured in the brand's first global campaign challenging stereotypes and encouraging female diversity. Her elevated profile led to a book deal with Yellow Jersey, a sport division of the world's biggest publisher, Penguin Random House. Eni will also soon feature in a global documentary about women footballers who played a major role in growing the sport.

More recently, we were fortunate to take Boots on this exciting journey into women's football by developing partnership with all the UK's home nations and the Irish FA. It has been described as a watershed moment for women's football and rightly so. Having one of Britain's leading retailers get behind the sport is going to be transformational in further elevating the profile and access to the game at all levels.

And finally, in line with our ambition to help drive meaningful and tangible contributions to women's sport, we worked with Coca-Cola to develop a first of its kind partnership with Channel 4 to commission a TV programme 100% dedicated to covering highlights of women's football from around the globe's top leagues. We are working with another client to address the fact that women's sport currently receives less than 10% of sports media coverage while creating a shop window for the incredible talents and personalities in women's football.

There is still work to be done but it's undeniable that women's football has finally been legitimised in the eyes of the media, the fans and the sponsors. I expect more media owners to invest in coverage, as we've already seen with many top news organisations employing dedicated journalists and editors.

We can also expect a continuation of investment from sponsors as rights holders unbundle their rights and begin to treat women's football as a unique and appealing proposition in its own right. What this will do is elevate the sport and its players to the level where it starts to rival the men's game. When that happens, and the game becomes a closer reflection of the diverse society in which we live, everyone will benefit.

This article first appeared in the ['World at her feet'](#) report, published by BCW.

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