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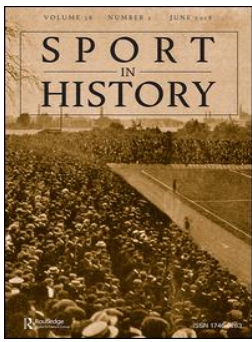
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The F.A.'s ban of women's football 1921 in the contemporary press – a historical discourse analysis

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ABSTRACT

On the 5th of December 1921, the English Football Association (FA) issued a ban prohibiting women's football matches from taking place on pitches owned by clubs associated with the FA. Thereby the sport's practice was not forbidden but its development was significantly hindered by restricting access to facilities. The FA's decree was the centre of much debate in the newspapers of the time. A discourse evolved around the question of prevailing gender roles as well as challenges thereof caused through the practice of football and sport by women. Many statements implicit to this discourse were frequently linked to a much wider disparity between contemporary traditional gender norms and the ascent of female emancipation due to the circumstances during and after the First World War. This paper employs a method of historical discourse analysis to assess and analyse statements within the newspaper discourse and contribute to the research about women and gender in sport and beyond. Moreover, the paper aims to render visible the ways in which questions of gender and its socio-political importance were already a matter of contention in the early twentieth century, mirroring some of the debates in academic circles nowadays.

KEYWORDS Women's sports history; women's football; historical discourse analysis; British press; interwar period

Introduction

There is, along with [few] other autocratic entities, none more powerful than the Football Association - except women.¹

This introductory quote from the *Leeds Mercury* speaks to two points of central importance to the following paper. First, it refers to a resolution by the English Football Association from 5 December 1921, banning women's

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football matches taking place on pitches of clubs belonging to the Association. Thereby the sport's practice by women was not prohibited but its development was significantly hindered by restricting access to football facilities.² Secondly, it exemplifies the coverage of the ban in the media and the discourse that arose around it. A discourse evolved around the question of prevailing gender roles as well as challenges thereof caused through the practice of football and sport by women. Many statements implicit to this discourse were frequently linked to a much wider disparity between contemporary traditional gender norms and the ascent of female emancipation due to the circumstances during and after the First World War.

In the following paper, I will study the aforementioned ban of women's football in 1921 and analyse the debate in the newspapers, particularly with regard to the different statements that have constituted the discursive formation. Concretely, the paper seeks to answer the following question: *How can we understand the discourse surrounding the ban in the context of contemporary and changing gender relations?*

In order to adequately extract the statements implicit to the discourse and contextualise the expressed notions regarding women's football as partial examples of a wider social mindset, I will engage with the topic through the use of a discourse analysis.

The method employed in the following is based on the distinct historiographical model introduced by Achim Landwehr in *Geschichte des Sagens. Einführung in die Historische Diskursanalyse*.³ The method, as introduced by Landwehr consists of four main steps. The *first* one is the 'building of a corpus', meaning the establishment of an adequate number of relevant sources.⁴ For the intended press discourse analysis, the databank of the British Newspaper Archive (BNA⁵) has been employed, where I assessed all relevant sources in connection with the search term 'women's football'. In accordance with the research focus of this paper, I have limited the analysis to 29 articles published between the 5th and the 10th of December 1921 in 16 different newspapers. Two aspects have to be considered in connection with this source acquirement. First, as established by Landwehr, the compilation of a source corpus for the discourse analysis is 'not "objective"' as it is exposed to the influence of the discourse under study, the researchers' interest and her approach to the respective topic. Second, in this specific case the corpus of sources has also been affected by the content of the BNA's digital collection and the preciseness of its search algorithm. And even though the BNA contains millions of digitalised newspaper editions from the archives of the British Library, it naturally can not be considered all-encompassing.

The *second* part of Landwehr's method is the 'analysis of the context' divided into four sub-points, namely the establishment of the 'situational', the 'medial', the 'institutional' and the 'historical context' of the sources

being analysed and the discourse more generally.⁶ This does not only enable me to contextualise the discourse under study, but also to place the discourse surrounding women's football before a larger contemporary discursive background.

Part *three* of the analysis is the 'analysis of the statements' which summoned together constitute the discursive formation, according to Landwehr. The author derives his definition of statements from Foucault, describing them as 'regularly appearing and constructive components of a discourse'.⁷

Landwehr's system is concluded by part *four*, the 'discourse analysis' as such. He stresses the reciprocal interconnectedness between the separate statements and the discourse, as well as the connection to the wider context. Landwehr also underlines the importance of 'intra-discursive correlations' and 'inter-discursive connections and demarcations'.⁸

Even though he separates these four steps in his methodical explication, Landwehr repeatedly states that in application the discourse analysis consists of a coherent merge of the steps. Therefore, in the following paper the four steps of the research process will be combined into one collective, comprehensive analysis. Several reoccurring statements were extracted from the 29 articles examined and are linked to the respective background. Moreover, their intra- as well as inter-discursive connection was rendered visible. To extract these statements the context was familiarised, followed by the analysis of the articles regarding 'regularly appearing' key messages, opinions or terminology. Afterwards their interrelation across the articles and newspapers, as well as beyond that, were studied. However, as stated by Landwehr too, the implementation of the described proceeding was not always as clearly distinguishable as described here.

The assessment of the interwar years regarding the situation for women in general and in sport has been a point for controversy among historians, evolving over the past 30 years. Gender and women's historians in the 1990s, such as Susan Kingsley-Kent and Lesley Hall, have agreed that the period following the First World War knew a 'backlash' against women's rights and emancipation in the United Kingdom.⁹ They argue that while women increasingly moved into labour and the public sphere during the war to replace men sent to the front, they were subsequently expelled from these spheres again as a result of a policy of 'normalisation' that aimed to return British society, both in the work place and the home, to its pre-war norm. Specifically regarding gender roles in the post-war period, Kingsley-Kent writes:

The upheavals produced by the First World War provoked responses designed to re-create the social, political, and economic order that had prevailed prior to August 1914. [...] Nowhere is this more evident than in the realm of gender identity and relations between men and women.¹⁰

More recently, historians have contradicted this perception arguing that the interwar years have to be analysed through a more balanced approach. Adrian Bingham argues ‘that although there was certainly no revolution in gender relations during the interwar era, the “backlash” model employed by many historians inhibits a proper understanding of those changes that did occur at this time’. Several other historian, including Ina Zweiniger-Bargiełowska in her research on leisure activities for women, agree with this notion of ‘women’s liberation during this period’.¹¹

Women’s sports historians, such as Fiona Skillen and Jennifer Hargreaves, have maintained that it was ‘after the First World War that sport was truly opened up to women of all classes’.¹² Nonetheless, they also argue that the patriarchy still controlled the male dominated domain of sport: ‘In numerous sports contexts, men held the power to stop women’s progress because they monopolised resources and held controlling and decision-making power’.¹³ Alina Bernstein and Neil Blain further state that ‘perhaps more than any other social institution, sport perpetuates male superiority over female inferiority’. Both scholars argue that that one medium through which these stereotypes have been and are communicated is print media.¹⁴ Contrary to this, one of Bingham’s central, recurrent theses in several of his works holds that ‘newspapers generally embraced modernity’.¹⁵ He equated modernity with ‘changing expectations and wider opportunities for young women’, as well as a weakening of the ideal of the domestic housewife – all inter alia mediated by the media.¹⁶ Bingham therefore criticises the assessment of historians who describe the interwar press as being ‘hostile’¹⁷ and moreover their one-dimensional approach while studying this.¹⁸ He argues that:

It is important that historians develop a more sophisticated model of the relationship between the media and gender identities which recognize the diversity and complexity of cultural representations and acknowledges that the media cannot “impose” patriarchy on an unwilling audience.¹⁹

The following research aspires to show that these contradictory assessments of scholars can also be made regarding the topic of women’s football. Moreover, it will become visible that the change and challenging of gender roles had already been an intrinsic element of the historical (newspaper) discourse.

This paper is divided into three parts. The first is an extended introduction to the *History of women’s football in the UK* which will serve as an insight into the sport’s development and as a first contextual basis for the discourse analysis. The second part of the paper *Discursive Formation – The 1921 Ban of women’s football in the Press* is an elaboration on the results of the analysis itself – statements, context, discourse – based on Landwehr’s introduced method. The paper is completed by a *Conclusion* of the findings from the

empirical part and an *Outlook* which thematises more recent occurrences regarding the public depiction of women's football, as well as related topics for further research.

History of women's football in the UK

Increasing research about women's football since the beginning of the 2000s, notably by Jean Williams and Alethea Melling, has shown that the sport has been played by women long before the First World War. Regarding the first 'modern' football game, differing views have been expressed. Williams states in two of her earlier works, that 'Inverness, Scotland appears to have hosted the first recorded women's football match in 1888'.²⁰ In another work of hers from 2014 – and repeated in a further text – she mentions an even earlier game: 'The earliest organised game seems to have taken place on 9 May 1881 when a team calling themselves England played a side named Scotland at Easter Road, Edinburgh'.²¹

Disregarding the exact date of the first match, this nonetheless shows that matches were played significantly earlier than World War One, a finding also sustained by Hargreaves.²²

In 1894, with the establishment of the 'British Ladies' Football Club', the first official body was founded, leading to the regular organisation of female football matches: 'The general public gradually became aware of this new sensation and a women's match played in Newcastle in 1895 was attended by 8,000 spectators'.²³ Williams explicates these games as being official matches, little is known about women's football beyond the organised events. This – still limited – attention was negatively perceived by the Football Association and therefore the organisation imposed its first restrictions on the sport by foreclosing 'men's clubs from playing against "lady teams"'.²⁴

However great the attention women's football as a niche sport might have received at the turn of the century, the First World War had a significant impact on its increased popularisation. This development had several reasons. With the onset of World War One, many British men enlisted for the army, their absence leaving large gaps in the work places and leisure spheres, such as sport. Concerning the lack of 'men power' in the industry and other workplaces, Melling observes:

In England, factories that had previously produced engineered goods or other products such as glass were turned over to munitions, and as Lord Kitchener's sombre image reminded men that "Your Country Needs YOU!", women began to take their places in the factories as rapidly as men left for the front.²⁵

To provide these women – especially in munition factories – with recreational opportunities for 'physical welfare' after long shifts, so-called 'welfare workers'

organised different leisure activities for women in their time off work.²⁶ Why particularly football became widespread among the women is explicated by Angela Woollacott, in her book about munition workers: 'That football should have become so popular is significant because it was a sport associated with the lower class [...]. It seems that young women workers were demonstrating class allegiance at the same time that they challenged gender constrictions'.²⁷

The enthusiasm women had for the sport was utilised in an additional way, namely by organising games for charity purposes. Thereby the women raised money for the war effort and other purposes alongside their work in the factories. Since women's football was still 'something of a novelty' for the wider public, large numbers of spectators led to the collection of huge sums of money.²⁸ In turn, the patriotic devotion of players led to an interesting phenomenon nurturing the unhindered development of the sport for the time being,

the boom in women's football was due to the national enthusiasm for the war effort since the matches were played to raise money for charity. [...] In this context playing football was not seen as a sign of moral decadence but as evidence of the patriotism of the women playing football.²⁹

In the press, these efforts were perceived very positively and the sport as well as players were described in rather favourable terms:

A few days ago I had a talk with the organisers of two of the best of those unexpected products of the war – women's football teams. [...] I suppose there are a great many who think that women's football is still a travesty of the real thing. I wish they could have been present to absorb the healthy enthusiasm and quiet sincerity about the game which these excellent types of English athletic womanhood revealed.³⁰

But the popularity of women's football had another reason too. Despite the absence of numerous male football players as soldiers in the war, competitions were upheld by the Football Association, though on a limited scope. Melling explicates the extent of this absence based on the example of the county Lancashire:

During the First World War 4,765 of Lancashire's footballers were enlisted into the armed forces, leaving a huge gap in working-class popular leisure, necessitating the reorganization of football for the duration of the war. Women then helped to fill the gap created as they did in many other areas.³¹

Moreover as Williams has shown, the decision of the F.A. to continue its football operations, while other sports had terminated their competitions during the ongoing conflict, were not perceived overall positively by the public. women's football and its charity efforts meanwhile proved to be a good amelioration of the 'tarnished' reputation 'through the appeal to patriotism'.³² Thereby the F.A. profited from women's football.

The increasing popularity of the sport during the war and in the years immediately after, explain spectators in the ten thousands, the collection of great amounts for charity and up to 150 teams all over the country.³³ Hargreaves states that these achievements were, however, not always seen favourable and ‘as soon as the women’s game was consolidated and reached a peak of success, so the seeds of its downfall were being sown’.³⁴

Among history scholars the interwar change of gender roles and the situation for women following the World War has repeatedly been debated. One aspect the scholars distinctly agree on is the following:

Women’s participation in sport was influenced by cultural and societal discourses, which often related to perceived “traditional” gender roles, biological functions and notions of female propriety. Women’s experiences were shaped by these discourses, which could impinge on all aspects of their lives.³⁵

women’s football certainly fell victim to prevailing ‘traditional’ gender norms, due to a decision made by a governing body consisting solely of men. While games were continuously played in the first years following the war – including for charity purposes – in December 1921, the English Football Association passed the following declaration, as reprinted in the *Hull Daily Mail* under the headline ‘F.A.’s Ban on women’s football’:

Complaints have been made as to football being played by women, the Council feel impelled to express their strong opinion that the game of football is quite unsuitable for females and ought not to be encouraged. Complaints have also been made as to the conditions under which some of these matches have been arranged and played, and the appropriation of the 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 Council request the clubs belonging to the Association to refuse the use of their grounds for such matches.³⁶

Williams has defined the term ban, which will also be the meaning the following analysis is based on: ‘The quasi-legal terminology of a “ban” reflects a social taboo against women’s involvement in sport that is more enduring’.³⁷

The reasons mentioned in the resolution itself, might have been the official ones stated by the F.A. and they may have reflected some public opinions, however, most scholars argue that these justifications were little more than proxy-arguments. The main reason for the ban was to recapture the men’s domain of football, thereby demonstrating the following:

This example therefore provides a salutary reminder that in spite of the inroads women made into sport during the interwar years they could never fully transcend the conventional notion of women’s place in sport, namely as secondary to that of men.³⁸

Williams explains the effectiveness and severe impact of the ban as

a quick and crudely effective strategy to protect the development of masculine professionalism because without the grounds to stage large contest, women's football was socially, culturally and economically marginalized. Women's football has never recovered its early popularity in terms of status or support. Having established itself as a show, the capacity to perform in locations that held larger crowds was vital to guarantee substantial following.³⁹

One medium through which this resolution was publicly mediated and the prevailing cultural and societal discourse(s) were represented was the contemporary press of the early 1920s. In the following section I will try to reconstruct the discursive formation and embodied statements surrounding women's football and its ban in the newspapers. Moreover it will be demonstrated that the discourse represents and converges the more general discussion about gender roles, emancipation, patriarchy as well as women and sport and is thereby not only an exemplary insight into the wider contemporary discourse of the 1920s, but also indicates the origin and development of some positions held towards women's football today.

Discursive formation – the 1921 ban of women's football in the press

It is important to note that of the 29 articles analysed in this essay, the vast majority (18) were not published on the sports page of the respective newspapers. This is at a time in which, as Jeffrey Hill states, the scope of the sports pages in the daily newspapers increased substantially – as did the newspaper circulation itself:

By the inter-war years the specialist sporting press has lost some of its appeal to the national “tabloid” dailies and Sunday newspapers, with their characteristic sports pages placed at the back of the paper and covering some 10–15 per cent [...] of its entire content.⁴⁰

In general, no obvious connection between the position of the article and the opinion voiced regarding women's football was detectable. Interestingly, the articles which reflect more affirmative views about the sport, and also women's participation in sport more widely, are slightly more often placed on pages outside the sport section. This could have had more universal reasons, assuming that these articles were also more likely directed at female readers: ‘In a society in which men and women were still heavily segregated in both work and leisure, editors and journalist were confident that appealing to women meant providing a different sort of content from that aimed at men [...]’.⁴¹ This means, that the articles addressing women, were placed outside the male domain of the sports section.

Of the articles analysed no more than one was printed on the title page, namely in the *Daily Herald* under the headline ‘Check to Girls’.⁴² This can be understood as an indicator that at the time of the ban, it was not widely

perceived as a pivotal newsworthy occurrence, as Bingham explains: ‘Women’s “firsts” were news and were treated as such, yet thereafter women’s experiences rarely hit the headlines’.⁴³ That the *Daily Herald* placed its article so centrally is therefore uncommon but allows some conclusions regarding the reach of the ban. The *Daily Herald* was one of the five main newspapers at the time who ‘dominated the market’.⁴⁴ Out of the other four major newspapers however, (*Daily Mail*, *Daily Express*, *Daily Mirror* and *Daily News*⁴⁵) only the *Mail* reported about the F.A.’s resolution as well.

The chosen headline in the *Daily Herald*, ‘Check to Girls’, represents a statement intrinsic to the discourse with regard to the employed terminology. The female footballers are repeatedly titled girls. Gender historian Julia Wood has evaluated the importance of language and certain descriptions regarding the ‘trivializing, deprecating, and diminishing [of] women and anything associated with femininity’.⁴⁶ Wood holds that ‘calling women *girls* (a term that technically refers to a female who has not gone through puberty) defines them as children, not adults’.⁴⁷ Even though some of the footballers were as young as 14, denoting all of them as girls denied them a certain seriousness and also held patronising connotations. This terminology does also exemplify the wider perception of the women. Bernstein and Blain state that ‘whereas male athletes are “valorized, lionized, and put on cultural pedestals” female athletes are infantilized by sport commentators who refer to them as “girls” or “young ladies” – male athletes are men’.⁴⁸ Not ‘young ladies’ but ladies is indeed a term repeatedly inherited in the discourse under study. The *Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette* for example headlined one article ‘Not for Ladies’.⁴⁹ The sport is also repeatedly titled ‘Ladies Football’ instead of women’s football, thereby it is not only demarcated by becoming gendered but an anticipation of women in sport having to be ‘lady-like’ (feminine, graceful etc.) is implied.⁵⁰ That this notion is indeed prevalent and a key statement forming the discourse, will be taken up again below.

The articles evaluated can not be strictly divided into either supporting or opposing the F.A.’s resolution and women’s football. Among the body of reoccurring statements different nuances in the opinions regarding the sport can be observed. Within one newspaper or even one article different views towards the ban can be detected. Whereas one article might hold affirmative views toward the ban in regard to one statement, it will oppose the decision based on another intrinsic statement of the ban. Therefore, a strict analysis and classification of the newspapers or articles has not and can not be undertaken – though it should be noticed that some newspapers continuously, heavily oppose women’s football. Instead, in accordance with Landwehr’s method, I will attempt to reconstruct the reoccurring statements that make up the formatin of the discourse under study. Even though all the statements are of course interconnected, for the purpose of approachability and

traceability they have been separated in the following analysis. Nonetheless their interconnectedness and reciprocal structure will become visible.

The professed reason for the ban, the misappropriation of money, is a recurring statement in the newspaper discourse. However, it is mostly mentioned with the reference towards the large amounts raised, therefore the charity character of the games is rather mentioned as an argument to maintain the women's matches. An article in the *Derby Daily Telegraph*, which in general coincides with the F.A.'s 'attitude towards the playing of the game by women', for example admits that 'the strongest argument in its favour appears to be the large amount of money that has been raised for charity'.⁵¹ One of the repeatedly occurring statements revolves around the emotional argument of the charity money raised through games, often based on explicit examples: 'the Plymouth Club had benefited various charitable institutions in different parts of the country to the extent of over £1,000'.⁵² Moreover, the – often military – beneficiaries, now losing donations, are emphasised: 'The ex-service men of Leyland, and also of Preston, have sent a telegraph of protest to the Football Association'.⁵³ Thereby, it is not only appealing to the emotions of the reader, but reports like these evoke a patriotic leverage of the women's mentioned charity efforts during the war and the obligation towards the returning soldiers.

This national and patriotic connotation is also detectable in other articles. For example, an explicit critique suggested that the UK, in their treatment of female footballers, appeared to be more regressive than other countries:

The action of the English Association was in striking contrast to French football authorities, who not only gave every encouragement to women footballers but rendered them substantial financial aid. In France it was fully realized that football was a healthy recreation for women, and it was amazing to find that English sportsmen hold a different view.⁵⁴

Alfred Frankland, the manager of the most successful women's team at the time Dick, Kerr Ladies, is one of the officials quoted in nearly every newspaper; an adversary of the ban, he is delineated as being 'disgusted that anybody of his fellow-countrymen could take such a retrograde step'.⁵⁵ That sport is often closely linked to the national identity has been intensely shown in research.⁵⁶ Football, especially, is of great importance in the UK and for the country's identity.⁵⁷ Moreover, as elaborated on in the previous chapter on the history of women's football, during the war the sport had earned a distinct patriotic connotation. Therefore, this terminology and nationalised appeal in the interwar period could be understood as a plea to the patriotism of the English sportsmen.

Whenever the charity purpose of women's football is mentioned in negative terms it is to question the players commitment: 'In such cases, where women footballers have been paid for "broken time" [missed work] and

entertained at luncheon and dinner out of revenue, it is plain that the plea of charity becomes very thin'.⁵⁸ Concurrently, the charitable character of the games is included in the dismissal of the sport: 'The women's teams certainly have raised large sums for charity, but that is an agreeable fact, and not an argument. A bullfight for the same objects would do just as well'.⁵⁹ Both approaches aim to 'neutralise' the one argument which irrefutably negate the hinderance of women's football, the charity sums generated through playing on large, professional pitches. However, there are different assessments regarding the importance of the charity character after the end of the war. Gertrud Pfister, Kari Fasting, Sheila Scraton and Benilde Vázquez in their text assess that 'one problem was certainly the fact that after the war the argument of raising money for charity as a legitimisation of women's football matches began to lose its validity'.⁶⁰ Williams on the other hand argues:

Women's teams raised considerable funds for charity, more after the First World War had concluded than during the conflict'. While the importance of the funds generated by the games might have decreased, the amount of funds did not and it is unquestionable that there were prevailing beneficiaries in need of donations after the war, which are indicated in some of the articles, e.g. 'ex-servicemen'.⁶¹

To counter any claims of misappropriations it is expressed, mostly through comments by players or officials, that if money was taken it was either to compensate for work time the player had to miss for a game⁶² or else for travel expenses: 'when completing a long journey late at night a charge for cabs for those who live miles from the railway station is thoroughly justifiable'.⁶³ These defences are mostly paraphrased from a letter written by Major Cecil Kent, a former Liverpool football official, to the F.A. in which he speaks out against the ban. Similarly to the comments given by Frankland, Kent's letter is mentioned in most of the media coverage assessed in this paper. Other experts who are mentioned once or twice as criticising the ban include several female players, one unnamed doctor and welfare-workers who organised football for the women in factories during the war. Interestingly, with Frankland and Kent two men become the dominant voices on the affirmative side of the discourse. In general, the leading public protagonists of the discourse were, beside the two female doctors, one female welfare worker and some players, only men. Accentuating that similarly to the ban, women were also marginalised in this public discourse concerning their sport participation which was determined mostly by men.

Another reoccurring statement in the press also connects to the claims of misappropriation, as well as the F.A.'s assessment of women's football as being 'unsuitable'. The game is frequently described as an 'element of burlesque'⁶⁴, an 'exhibition'⁶⁵, a 'spectacle'⁶⁶ or a 'circus affair'.⁶⁷ The sexualised

notion of burlesque does prevail and it is repeatedly delineated that games have 'been attended by crowds of prurient-minded men who went avowedly not so much to see how women could play football but to observe them make an exhibition of their limbs. [...] purely sexual motives'.⁶⁸ Although not all articles ascribe it to this sexualization, it is a common notion that the game is a 'curiosity'.⁶⁹ This is linked to a comment by the F.A. Council member F.J. Wall given additionally to the resolution. He claims that some women's football teams are run by men who use the curiosity-character to attract many spectators and enrich themselves, linking this back to the misappropriation accusations in the resolution and the denigration of the sports positive charitability.

Inconsistently, while women's football was claimed to be 'an element of burlesque' it was also stigmatised as unfeminine, ungraceful and masculinising. Sometimes, the contradictory statements can be found in the same articles.⁷⁰ These propositions were directly linked to pronounced fears that the players 'future duties as mother would be seriously impaired'.⁷¹ This statement of sport as a threat to the perceived natural reproductive duties of the female sex is not only discernible for football but was a controversy regarding physical recreation in general. Skillen has researched the importance placed on motherhood among contemporaries: 'Underlying fears regarding physical education were bound up with ideals of femininity, whether fears about women not projecting their femininity through their carriage and demeanour, or, more fundamentally fears about the potentially harmful effects on their reproductive organs'.⁷² 'It is clear that the emphasis [...] had to be placed on ability to fulfil future roles as wives and mothers. As well as an explicit concern over the ability of women to conceive and carry healthy children'.⁷³ Kingsley-Kent has argued that in the interwar years a 'state endowment of motherhood' could be observed, which would contextualise this fear concerning the decline of reproduction as a wider national matter of the time.⁷⁴ This rather biological concern about women footballers femininity and reproductive health can also be observed as an intrinsic influence in a majority of the other statements forming the discourse.

One of the mentioned welfare workers – here the magnitude of the perceived threat regarding reproduction becomes noticeable again – was reported as having been questioned by the Birth Rate Commission of the National Council of Public Moral. As mentioned before, different nuances in the public perception and newspaper depiction of women's football can be distinguished, this is best exemplified by the following. According to the article, the welfare worker described football to be 'lady-like' and 'nothing to be ashamed of'. Simultaneously she nonetheless also defined it as 'nothing very serious' and that most spectators watched the game only due to 'pure curiosity'.⁷⁵

The most central statement – even in articles which depict women’s football rather positively – is the notion that the sport is unsuitable for women, a notion that is only shortly touched on in the resolution of the F.A., but in fact forms the core message of the resolution as well as the contemporary press discourse. This was embodied in aforementioned comments on the absent elegance of the sport ‘where she [the player] loses much of her natural charm in actions that are often devoid of grace’.⁷⁶ The other reinforcement of this statement of unsuitability can be seen in medical arguments. Out of 29 articles 17 touch on this point, which can be connected to a much larger discourse concerning medical discussions about women in sport, also linking back to the discussion about the impact of sport on women as mothers. Two slightly different medical evaluations of women’s football can be distinguished.

First, the sport specifically is depicted as too strenuous, differently from other team sports, such as cricket.⁷⁷ In general, team sports were rather welcomed in the time under study, even of ‘key importance’ as Osborne and Skillen argue, to show young women ‘about their expected future roles in society’ through the inherited structure of team sports.⁷⁸ Football nonetheless was even perceived as ‘harmful to women’.⁷⁹ The ‘experts’ interviewed regarding these medical assessments are repeatedly the same cluster of mostly male individuals, primarily former footballers and managers and repeatedly the same two *female* doctors. However, neither the doctors nor the other ‘experts’ further elaborate on the reasons why football should be perceived as too strenuous and harmful. The second observed medical approach is the assessment that women are not of the right physique to play football. The British tennis player Eustace Miles is mentioned as the expert in this regard: “I consider football quite an inappropriate game for most women [...] just as the frame of a woman is more rounded than a man’s, her movements should be more rounded and less angular”.⁸⁰

The few female players or coaches of women’s teams questioned by the newspapers hold another view regarding the alleged risk of injury. Nearly all of those consulted agree that women’s football is not injurious and that they perceive the game to be beneficial after long shifts or even as a means to strengthen women for work. One women’s coach from a workplace in London is mentioned as stating: “that the members of our football club are more fit for their work than the waitresses who do not take part in athletics”.⁸¹ These medical evaluations of sport being beneficial for performances in labour and even strengthening for the physic of women as mothers, were to become the mainstream attitude within the medical field in the years after but, as Skillen argues, ‘many pseudo-medical arguments continued to be used in the press’.⁸²

In some articles these medical observations are further employed to legitimise the opinion that the football played by women must be seen as

physically different from the ‘ordinary game’ and should therefore neither be encouraged nor publicly played. Hargreaves has shown in her research, that this has to be estimated as a rather common perception of the time: ‘Not surprisingly, also, the survival of reactionary attitudes about the limitations of female biology continued to influence the type and extent of women’s involvement [in sport]’.⁸³ Accordingly, it is a repeated observation in this discourse that women’s football or at least most teams were designated as not good enough to watch. In one article of the *Liverpool Echo*, the following is suggested: ‘The majority of teams are hopeless’, most women’s teams would ‘fall easy victims to a team of schoolboys under fourteen drawn from the elementary school’.⁸⁴ Bernstein and Blain have studied this universal denying of ability as a very common practice in the media – until today ‘the media construct female athleticism as not only “the other”, but as “lesser than” the male’s’.⁸⁵

Considering this outlined critique, it must be questioned why large numbers of spectators were often attending women’s football matches. Since World War I, women’s football was no longer a niche sport, and the mentioned high charity revenues demonstrate this. Melling elucidates on these charity amounts further on the example the Dick, Kerr Ladies: ‘In 1921 alone Dick, Kerr’s played 67 games for charity in front of 900,000 people and for 25 of these matches alone the gate receipts totalled £22,525’.⁸⁶ The discourse also inherits an explanation referring to the question of why spectators went to the games. Beside the mentioned ‘element of burlesque’, the leverage of ‘novelty’ is repeatedly mentioned as generator of large crowds. However, critics agree that ‘those most closely concerned with football management will not be sorry to see the last of what has after all been a burlesque, the novelty of which had shown distinct signs of wearing off’.⁸⁷ Therefore several articles imply that women’s football would not have survived much longer anyway.⁸⁸

It is also repeatedly assumed by some authors that the majority of the public agrees with the decision made by the F.A. In some of the articles rather supportive of the sport, this estimation can be observed too: ‘I believe that the majority will be in accord, and that the scientific opinion will, without exception, support the governors of this manly game’.⁸⁹ To reinforce this it was repetitively stressed that most women were in support of the resolution: ‘Even among women, generally, the playing of football by the sex is far from being popular’.⁹⁰ Fiona Skillen, in her research about women and sport in interwar Britain, has indeed shown, based on oral history interviews conducted by her, that many contemporary women agreed that football ‘could not have been regarded as “respectable”’.⁹¹

Hand in hand with this statement of the ban representing public opinion, several articles exalted the decision-making of the F.A. and the organisation as such. This becomes especially apparent in an article by the *Hull Daily Mail*:

we make bold to say that its [the F.A.'s] rule and governance of its great game is a pattern and an example to legislative bodies, Parliament not excluded. This Council is so wise that its decisions are respected universally, and its prestige so high that disobedience never enters the minds of its associates and followers.⁹²

This quote is not only exemplary of some newspapers' and authors' support and approval of the ban and the F.A., but overarchingly paradigmatic of the reinforcement of a patriarchal decision sustained by the intra-discursive statements formed in the newspapers, who 'contributed to the evolution of ideas of gender'.⁹³ John Steel has also argued that media's depiction of sportswomen has to be seen as a reflection of society beyond the realm of sport: 'Such marginalization of course not only diminished the broader significance of women's participation in elite sport, it also reinforces much more deeply embedded notions of gender division within society'.⁹⁴

Contradictory to this vaunting of the F.A.'s decision, some journalists, as well as officials and players through comments, questioned whether the F.A. was missing adequate knowledge about women's football to interfere in the sport. Some statements also contested the F.A.'s legal position to interfere with women's football: 'The Association, it was true, had no standing in the matter, the same as they have over their own clubs'.⁹⁵ Though, it has to be said that the F.A. did not forbid women playing football, but suggested its affiliated clubs not support the sport by prohibiting access to their facilities. As has been defined above, this ban stigmatised the sport as a 'social taboo' rather than being an actual legal prohibition.⁹⁶ The character and severity of the appeal was also discussed in the newspapers. Therein, it was repeatedly determined that this 'request is an order' and the clubs were criticised because they could 'now shelter themselves behind the "request"'.⁹⁷ As has been evaluated before, even though the ban did not forbid women's football it was a deliberate hinderance of its practice and development.

To contextualise this, it has to be mentioned that the women teams offered the F.A. to regulate them under their legislation.⁹⁸ Instead of seizing control of the sport (and its charitable financial side) the F.A. narrowed its development. This does reinforce the above elaborated arguments by scholars that the actions taken by the F.A. were mainly directed to (re-)masculinise football: 'Banning women as a group could be interpreted as a rather clumsy attempt on behalf of the Association and the League to reinforce the masculine image of football'.⁹⁹ It would take the F.A. another 72 years until the association accepted women's football as part of the association, thereby ensuring a systematic and financially stable development of the sport.

Connectedly, a more overarching statement of the discourse is the perception that the F.A. and football felt threatened and a bigger distress about emancipation in general was underlying the ban, thereby placing the debate in a larger societal context. One author sarcastically wrote:

On the other hand, if the Football Association had diplomatically recognised women's football with the idea of getting control over it, how long would it have been before women had ruled the men's game as well as their own? Truly the position is an awkward one.¹⁰⁰

Another article asks 'Was there ever a man's game or custom or habit that did not seem to him peculiar repulsive when taken up by the ladies?'¹⁰¹ Connected to addressing these assumed fears of emancipation among men is a critique of men interfering in women's affairs: 'It opens up the whole question of playing games by women, and whether men can and shall be sole arbiter about which game girls may or may not play'.¹⁰² Attestations like these demonstrate an increasing conviction that women should and could enter and influence the sport hegemon, nonetheless it does also express the constant struggles while doing so. This does not only link this specific example of women's football to a much larger discourse about women in sport, it also emphasises a possible demand for and development towards a change in gender roles at the time under study, as has been argued by some scholars such as Bingham or Zweiniger-Bargielowska.

In the majority of articles which actually featured the voices of the sports-women affected by the ban, one thing is repeatedly reaffirmed, women's football is not overpowered and the players intended to continue their sport, also for charity purposes. The chronologically last article of the source corpus analysed does describe plans by over fifty clubs to establish an 'English Ladies Football Association', with an official being cited: 'Our present watchword is "Carry on"'.¹⁰³ Though this attempt to form an official body for women's football was not very successful, it was a first step towards a maintenance of the sport which continued – despite the obstacles – until the F.A.'s ban was eventually revoked in 1972.¹⁰⁴ This optimism to overcome aggravation is recognisable in several articles. One journalist wrote hopefully: 'In spite of present prejudice, we may live to know the boy who is proud of his mother because she is a retired half-back'.¹⁰⁵

Conclusion

As explicated, the forgone analysis is an extraction of different inter- and intra-discursively connected statements which from the discourse under study in relation with the respective background(s). The reoccurring main statements of this discourse regard (I) the debate about the charitable character of the sport, (II) the perceived sexualised element of women's football, (III) the simultaneously ascribed unfeminine and masculinising nature of the game as well as (IV) medical arguments of alleged exertion and physical inability. Moreover, (V) the public perception of the ban is debated as well as (VI) the decision-making authority of the F.A. and (VII) the larger question of female emancipation – in sport and more generally – is touched on.

Interestingly, the main reason stated in the resolution by the F.A., namely the misappropriation of money, is only part of a larger discourse in the newspapers that overarchingly focuses on the compatibility of women's football and contemporary gender norms.

A connection to perceived traditional gender roles – femininity as an ideal; perceived masculinising and sexualising elements as reprehensible – is apparent within all of the statements. Moreover, the detaining of what was seen as the natural, biological order of the sexes – women as mothers – is observable. The fact that both were discerned as threatened by practising football has been repeatedly demonstrated in the analysis. Repeatedly, arguments of decency ('unsuitable', 'lack of grace') and procreation are observable which are based on, and simultaneously reinforce, traditional gender norms.

At the same time the articles and statements have shown nuances which challenge these gender norms and appeal or move towards a modernised view on women in sport and their self-dependence beyond a patriarchal system. This might be seen as a first sight of what scholars, such as Bingham, have argued to be a period of modernisation in the interwar years in which the press 'contributed to the evaluation of ideas of gender'.¹⁰⁶ Simultaneously, some of the forms in which the statements were represented have also exemplified contrary arguments about the press as, what Huggins and Williams have termed, 'a force of conservatism in sport' in regard to Women.¹⁰⁷

All in all, women's football – not only in the UK – is until today a marginalised sport and is still seen as a predominately masculine domain. Unprecedented high numbers of television viewers and extended public attention of the 2019 Women's World Cup in France do however confirm an increasing popularisation.

Outlook

Anyone assuming that in the 100 years since the ban the public statements regarding women's football have progressed will be disillusioned. While newspapers are no more the locus for misogynistic comment, other media have replaced them. Comments such as the following in the reactionary online journal *The Federalist*, by an author who describes himself as a feminist, have become less obvious and frequent: "There were 22 people kicking a ball around with exceptional skill, tight triangle passing, counter attacks, everything I usually look for in a good fixture. So why was I bored out of my mind watching these games I tried to endure? [...] It's like watching soccer in slow motion".¹⁰⁸ Here the notion of the women's sport being lesser compared to men playing can be recognised.

However, the medium most availing for the public expatiations about women's football are social media. In tweets, posts and more, people comment on the sport in ways that do more than slightly reconnect to the statements

extracted above. Sexualisation of players and spectators, dismissing women's matches as 'unwatchable' or disputing the game being a sport, are seemingly still part of some mindsets.¹⁰⁹ One tweet, with a strongly antiquated character, reminding of the statement about motherhood evaluated above, was shortly to be found on the F.A.'s Twitter account after the English team's third place at the 2015 World Cup: 'Our #Lionesses go back to being mothers, partners and daughters today, but they have taken on another title – heroes'.¹¹⁰

How much messages like these are influenced and constituted by historical preforms or have other sources of influence should be the focus of further studies, considering that the usage of language does constitute social and cultural realities and only awareness of public rhetorical practises can avail equity.

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