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**Re-establishing the 'outsiders': English press coverage of the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup**

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## **Re-establishing the ‘outsiders’: English press coverage of the 2015 FIFA Women’s World Cup**

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### **Abstract**

In 2015, the England Women’s national football team finished third at the Women’s World Cup in Canada. Alongside the establishment of the Women’s Super League in 2011, the success of the women’s team posed a striking contrast to the recent failures of the England men’s team and in doing so presented a timely opportunity to examine the negotiation of hegemonic discourses on gender, sport and football. Drawing upon an ‘established-outsider’ approach, this article examines how, in newspaper coverage of the England women’s team, gendered constructions revealed processes of alteration, assimilation and resistance. Rather than suggesting that ‘established’ discourses assume a normative connection between masculinity and football, the findings reveal how gendered ‘boundaries’ were both challenged and protected in newspaper coverage. Despite their success, the discursive positioning of the women’s team as ‘outsiders’,

served to (re)establish men's football as superior, culturally salient and 'better' than the women's team/game. Accordingly, we contend that attempts to build and, in many instances, rediscover the history of women's football, can be used to challenge established cultural representations that draw exclusively from the history of the men's game. In such instances, the 2015 Women's World Cup provides a historical moment from which the women's game can be relocated in a context of popular culture.

### **Keywords**

Gender, women's football, 2015 women's world cup, established-outsiders, women's sport, sports media

### **Introduction**

Despite increasing participation and in view of the various challenges which have been made against patriarchal ideologies, media coverage of female sport continues to be problematically represented in comparison with male athletes (Biscomb and Griggs, 2012; Godoy-Pressland, 2014; Jakubowska et al., 2016; Ravel and Gareau, 2016; Woodward, 2016). Indeed, the effects of language and representation have occupied a prominent place in analyses of sport, gender and media. Burroughs (2014: 166) details that 'The newsprint media ... remains an important institution that has the ability to wield considerable influence through ideologically infused discourses'. However, when

women's sport is reported, it is often via discourses that are ambivalent about the role of women in sport and wider society (Christopherson et al., 2002) and which rely on conventional representations of heteronormative femininity (Pfister, 2015). Jakubowska et al. (2016: 413) argue that 'these tendencies undermine both the visibility and significance of women's athletic embodiment, reducing its potential to challenge sexist discourse'.

To this extent, the 2015 Women's World Cup presented a critical opportunity to examine the negotiation and challenging of hegemonic discourses on sport and gender. Taking place during a period of increased investment in English women's football, the 2015 World Cup followed the establishment of the first professional women's football league, the Women's Super League (WSL), in 2011. Moreover, after being considered outsiders prior to the tournament, due to their failure to win a knockout match in their previous three appearances, the English women's team finished third in the competition, the highest place finish of any England team since 1990.

With regard to work which has considered women's football (Caudwell, 1999; Harris, 2005; Scraton et al., 2005) and its media coverage (Christopherson et al., 2002), this article will consider how improvements to English women's football were reflected in newspaper coverage of the English team's success, especially as this occurred at a time when conventional narratives of the women's game were being challenged and/or reinforced. By way of examining how gendered 'boundaries are continuously

negotiated, since social actors engage in struggles over social categories and distinctions' (Duemmler, 2015: 4), we draw upon Elias and Scotson's (1994) established-outsider perspective in order to explore how newspaper coverage of the English team served to frame established views on football, gender and sport. Specifically, we consider how, in relation to the success of the English women's team, 'established' discourses on football were negotiated and struggled over in the English press (Duemmler, 2015; Jakubowska et al., 2016). It is to examining these 'struggles' that we now turn.

### **'Boundary-work' and the legitimation of gender relations: an established-outsider approach**

In examining how group boundaries are constructed, Petintseva (2015) highlights how a relational conception of power can redirect attention to the dynamics at play *between* groups. Here, the position of certain groups 'are not exclusively determined by objective elements (such as economic position)', but, rather, 'assumptions and representations' play a prominent role in shaping human relations (Petintseva, 2015). This is often achieved through the enactment of 'common sense' understandings of gender, which maintain the boundaries between male and female participants (Matthews, 2016). These boundaries are used by groups to mark their difference as well

as that of others. As a result, forms of recognition and belonging are closely related to group relations and, more importantly, the balance(s) of power that underscore these relations.

Contra Foucault (1980; 1994), this does not propose an analysis of ‘the relations between the discourses’, relevant to a particular social context, but, instead, asserts a consideration of ‘the relation between social developments and emerging prescriptions and proscriptions’ (Dolan, 2010: 19).<sup>1</sup> Drawing upon the work of Sheard and Dunning (1973; Dunning 1986), Matthews (2016: 314) argues that by analysing ‘shifting social processes, we can see that the proceeding years have resulted in an obvious empirical challenge to claims that “sport” represents a clear-cut space exclusively reserved for certain men’. Indeed, while power does not belong to any single dominant individual or group and whereas its ‘existence’ lies not in the autonomous production of particular subjects, there remains the opportunity to consider how unequal relations of power are reproduced in media discourses and how such discourses work to maintain gender relations in sport.

Based upon the above, it is our contention ‘that sociology should move towards a more *relational and processual understanding of power*’ (Velija, 2011: 82 [italics in original]), through which recognition and representation play an important role in group relations (Elias, 2005). Here, ‘power balances’ bind all individuals as well as the groups they form (Elias, 1977). This was exemplified in Elias and Scotson’s (1994) study of

the town 'Winston Parva'. They examined 'the social mechanisms that enabled a locally "established group" to create a power relationship over a newly arrived "outsider group"' (Duemmler, 2015: 381). Applying Elias and Scotson's established-outsider approach to gender relations follows previous calls to extend the relationship to wider empirical studies that seek to explore power dynamics (Black, 2016a; Petintseva, 2015).

Indeed, examining established-outsider discourses in media coverage does not suggest that 'established' notions assume a normative connection between masculinity and football or that established discourses will be inevitably portrayed. Rather, it directs attention to the *ways* in which connections between masculinity and male football form part of an established-outsider interplay within newspaper discourses. Despite the precarious nature of such connections, gendered constructions are grounded in relations of power and symbolic resources that serve to reify gender differences. Consequently, established-outsider relations should not be considered as static interpretations, but as a conceptual tool for exploring how certain groups are 'othered', positioned and represented in accordance with relations of power.

Following the power differentials more readily available to established groups, it is possible to examine how established groups choose to accept certain outsiders and how certain outsiders negotiate, often ambivalently, their relationship and association with established groups (Black, 2016a). This presents the opportunity to explore how the boundaries between established and outsider groups can reveal processes of



alteration, assimilation and resistance. In the case of women's football and in light of the success achieved by the English team in the 2015 Football World Cup, such opportunities offer a fruitful enquiry into the ways in which group distinctions are discursively configured amidst changing social processes.

### **Women's football: a brief history**

Within the UK, the history of Women's football presents a number of significant moments, with the earliest recorded match occurring in 1895 (Williams and Woodhouse, 1991). The game flourished during the First World War, with women's teams forming around the war factories where they worked. Whereas early games were organised to help raise money for war charities, peacetime working conditions did not dampen the women's enthusiasm and by the 1920s women's football was increasing rapidly in size and popularity. As Williamson (1991: 15) reports:

By early 1921 it was as if the country had been gripped by ladies' football fever. Teams now covered the country with every major town having its own side and the major cities having several, especially in the north.. Whether at the weekend or in the middle of the week there was a ladies' match being played somewhere. (cited in Williams and Woodhouse, 1991: 92)

The game reached its pinnacle on Boxing Day, 1920, when St. Helens Ladies played Dick Kerr Ladies at Goodison Park. There were 53,000 paying spectators with a further 10,000-14,000 fans locked out of the ground (Newsham, 1997; Pfister, et al., 2002). However, as the women's matches began to, on occasion, command greater attendances than men's matches, the FA began to view the women's game as demeaning and undermining the credibility of the men's game.

On the 5<sup>th</sup> December 1921, the FA banned women from playing on football league grounds. The premise of the ban was that the money raised for war charities was mishandled amid unproven allegations that too much of the revenue was spent on expenses (Newsham, 1997). Nonetheless, it is telling that the ban was accompanied by the statement that it was their 'strong opinion that the game of football is quite unsuitable for females and ought not to be encouraged' (cited in Newsham, 1997: 49). The ban was a crippling blow to women's football as it resulted in a loss of credibility and lack of vital facilities which left the women's game unable to attract large audiences, abruptly ending the war-time boom.

Notably, the ban ensured the invisibility of women in football as knowledge about the skills, abilities and success of women footballers was lost making these attributes the discursive property of males (Meân, 2001). It was not until fifty years later, in November 1971, that the FA rescinded the ban, fearing censure from UEFA

who had ordered all national football associations to take control of the women's game in their own countries. The Women's Football Association (WFA) did not gain formal affiliation to the FA until 1983.

In the 1980s women's football began to get some recognition. The England team won three tournaments in the mid-eighties, resulting in them being awarded the Sunday Times Team of the Year in 1988. The game was also given a much needed publicity boost by Channel 4 who screened programmes on the progress of the Women's FA Cup in 1989. This culminated in the live screening of the final between Leasowe Pacific and Fulham attracting more than 2.5 million viewers (Lopez, 1997). The coverage inspired many enquiries to the WFA from girls and women wanting to play and enquiries on how to start a women's club (Williams and Woodhouse, 1991). However, knowledge of football as a male domain appeared to remain and was reflected in the comments of senior members of the FA. Ted Croker, the then FA secretary, was cited as stating:

Football is a game of hard, physical contact, a form of combat. It is, and must remain, a man's game. Women have no place in it except to cheer on their men, wash and iron their kit, and prepare and serve refreshments (cited in Dunning, 1999: 235-6)

Therefore, the discourse promoted by the fifty-year ban that women were unsuitable for the football domain remained prominent, despite women players' increasing success.

In 2005, England hosted the Women's Euro 2005 tournament and, whilst the England Women's team fared relatively poorly, the tournament as a whole could be regarded as a success. The opening match saw the largest crowd at a women's football match in Europe, when 29,092 people watched England beat Finland 3-2. The same match had peak viewing figures of 2.9 million (12.12% of the audience share on a Saturday night) (Harlow, 2005).

The FA has a history of reproducing male sporting discourses by denying women access either through legislation or through the powerful enactment of knowledge of the domain as the exclusive property of males. Such organised exclusion has rendered women invisible (Meân, 2001) and football is reproduced as a primary tool of socialisation for hegemonic masculine identity which serves to delegitimise the history of women's football experience (Woodward, 2016). In accordance with the historical longevity of 'established groups', it is widely apparent that male hegemony within sport has a long history (Hargreaves, 1994; Williams, 2014) which continues to marginalise female participation and experience. Notwithstanding increasing female involvement in football, the sport's 'norms and values are sated in images of obsolete masculinity' (Clayton and Harris, 2004: 332 see also Caudwell, 1999). In part, these

narratives stem from the dominance of the men's Football League (established in 1886), and, more recently, the FA Premier League (established in 1992).

The formation of the WSL and some increased attention from media providers such as the BBC and BT Sport, has meant that proponents of the women's game have had reason to be optimistic. Nevertheless, despite the above history, Williams (2014: 72) argues that 'the supposed "newness" factor of women's interest in football is an invented tradition aimed to preserve an exclusively manly image and organisational culture of football's past'. Consequently, 'recent' improvements to women's football have served to position female involvement in football, within England, as an 'outsider' group. Additionally, despite the aforementioned progress, the male game has a number of important advantages. Sponsorship, media attention, improved facilities, a historical legacy and a popular cultural following all helped to establish the male game. Viewed through an established-outsider lens, it is evident that, as outsiders, women's football does not have access to the social networks and power resources which the 'established' (the men's game) can mobilise to assert their own position (Petintseva, 2015). This focuses our attention on the role of the media and how the media serves 'to keep' certain outsiders 'in place'. Accordingly, this article will examine the ways in which the England women's football team were positioned and their performance legitimated in English newspaper discourses.

## **Method**

Analyzing English national newspaper reports of the 2015 Women's World Cup allowed us to explore how media discourses portrayed established-outsider distinctions, and, specifically, the cultural conventions and values that are used to discursively frame male and female athletes (Young and Atkinson, 2012). Opening on the 6 June 2015, the 2015 Women's World Cup ran for four weeks (29 days), ending on the 5 July 2015.

In order to examine newspaper representations of the English women's national football team, it was decided that a relevant sample of newspaper articles would be drawn from the 'British/English' national press. Selected newspapers were collected one day prior to the tournament, continuing throughout the tournament's duration, before ending on 6 July 2015. Accordingly, eight national newspapers were collected for analysis; four tabloids: *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express*, *Daily Mirror* and *The Sun*; and, four broadsheets: *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The Times* and *The Daily Telegraph*.<sup>2</sup> Despite being sold throughout the UK, all newspapers are based in London and are widely circulated within England.<sup>3</sup> An equal split between the 'tabloid' and 'broadsheet' press, offered a balanced appraisal from both the 'quality' (broadsheet) and 'popular' (tabloid) newspaper formats and based upon 2017 circulation figures, selected newspapers offered a range in circulation (Ponsford, 2017).<sup>4</sup> This included *The Sun*, which has a circulation of 1,666,715, and *The Guardian*, which has a circulation of 156,756 (Ponsford, 2017).<sup>5</sup>

Over the course of the tournament, each newspaper was read once, with all articles pertaining to the England Women's football team selected for analysis. This included: news and feature articles, editorials, opinion pieces, interviews and match reports. In total, 203 newspaper articles were selected and subsequently analyzed. Each article underwent a process of qualitative thematic analysis. As highlighted in previous media analyses (Biscomb and Griggs, 2012; Black 2016a; 2016b; Jakubowska et al., 2016; Vincent et al., 2010), the thematic approach offered a way of exploring how newspaper representations of women's sport were constructed and framed.

In managing the analysis of each text and to ensure that emergent themes were compared across the press' coverage, a process of both open and axial coding was adopted (Vincent et al., 2010). While 'open coding' involved reading through each article and highlighting 'potential' sections that related to the framing of English women's football, the English national team, specific players, coaches and backroom staff, 'axial coding' involved building relationships between each highlighted section in order to construct overarching themes. Subsequently, 'axial coding' took place once all articles had been 'open coded', so that the analysis could focus on broader patterns and important significance across the sample. Throughout this process the researchers remained sensitive to the ways in which the thematic framing of the England team reflected the framing of established and outsider groups. These themes will now be considered.

### **Outsidering Women's Football**

One way that outsider distinctions are maintained is by representing certain individuals/groups in specific ways, so that they are positioned as different (Black, 2016a; Duemmler, 2015; Petintseva, 2015). In representing gender, the recourse to 'natural' arguments as justification for gender inequality serves to locate female sporting achievements as distinctly different to men (Channon and Matthews, 2015). Within the English press, references were made to the women's team as being in some way biologically incapable of achieving a perceived male standard. Samuel (2015: 78) noted how 'for obvious reasons' female footballers 'cannot cover the ground as quickly as men do at professional level'. Despite Syed's (2015: 64) suggestion that the 'gap' between the 'male' and 'female' game 'will narrow', Syed (2015) 'doubt[ed] that women will ever compete on level terms with men for various reasons of biology'. Instead, for the female game, 'the players are not as quick, as strong or, in most cases, as skilled' (Moore, 2015c: 8). Here, the women's outsider status in football was grounded in their biological inferiority as well as the stress of managing their family and sporting 'commitments' ("Chapman given big game boost", 2015; Taylor, 2015e).

The extent to which these statements reinforced the notion that sport is consigned to biological classifications of ability underlined reports that opted for a more positive account of the improvements to women's sport. Accordingly, while McVeigh



(2015: 16) was clear to point out that ‘everyone involved in the sport seems to be optimistic about the future’, in other instances, the women’s apparent biological inferiority was framed as an advantage. For Samuel (2015: 78), the slow pace of the women’s game – compared to the men’s – allowed female footballers to ‘have more freedom to control and pick out a pass’. In addition, Norman (2015: 26) noted that:

Women’s football is something else, and something better. The people playing it, after all, are women. Belonging to the emotionally developed, clearly superior half of the species, they tend not to trust in Bill Shankly’s saying that football is more important than a matter of life and death. Hugely competitive though they are, they give no impression of being engaged in a war without weapons.

The above examples serve to highlight how the England team were discursively positioned in contrast to male footballers and in accordance with traditional conceptions of femininity. Sometimes this outsider status was repositioned as an advantage. Yet, in the majority of cases such accounts invariably positioned the women’s team as distinctly different, and inferior, to the men’s.

This was apparent in examples that sought to compare the women against an established male standard (MacKay and Dallaire, 2009). Comparisons with male performances have been echoed in previous analyses of gender and sport (Biscomb and

Griggs, 2012; Fielding-Lloyd and Meân, 2008) and this was acknowledged by Kay (2015: 2), who noted that, ‘What women’s football really wants to emulate is just a large fraction of the recognition and the respect that the men’s game attracts’. With regard to the England women’s team, this ‘emulation’ occurred in a number of ways.

First, direct comparisons with the men’s game were noted. Walters (2015a: 62) exclaimed that for ‘watchers of the Women’s World Cup ... there is no higher praise that can be lavished upon womankind than to be favourably compared to their male counterparts’. Similarly, Johnson’s (2015: 32) patronizing remarks ‘that women can be big boys and compete in men’s sports on men’s terms’ followed the assertion that:

Women are perfectly able to play up and play the game just like men (even when they aren’t cushioned by fat sponsorship deals, and telephone-number salaries). ... Over the full 90 minutes, they didn’t wilt in the 80F heat. Their legs lasted.<sup>6</sup>

This was reflected in the atmosphere, which ‘matched any male World Cup tie for passion and dedication’ (Topping and Taylor, 2015: 7).

Second, certain reports sought to juxtapose and judge the women’s team against popular cultural representations drawn from the men’s game and, in particular, the England men’s team. While Reade (2015: 55) noted that ‘In the final half-hour of

Monday night's win over Norway our women showed more creativity, character and desire than our men did throughout their entire time at last year's World Cup in Brazil', other accounts referenced English 'male' success in both the 1966 (when England last won the World Cup) and 1990 (when England reached the semi-finals) World Cup tournaments (Hope, 2015; Topping and Taylor, 2015).

In the above examples, significant 'moments' from the history of the men's game were used as a way of framing and measuring the women's success. Whereas this serves to support the notion that established groups occupy a historical longevity that supports their established status, it also revealed how the women's team were judged against an established 'male' standard. Such references were echoed in the 'lovely, skillful cameos and the winning strike from [England defender] Lucy Bronze', which Reade (2015: 55) noted, 'would have made any male international proud', and in references to England forward, Fran Kirby, as the 'mini Messi' (Leighton, 2015b; Newton 2015; Reade, 2015; Samuel 2015). In comments pertaining to the Brazilian forward, Marta Vieira da Silva ('Marta'), it was highlighted that: 'The easiest thing would be to portray her as the female Pele, but that exacerbates the problem, since *it strengthens the perception women's sport cannot be judged on its own merits, and in its own context*' ('It is tactically naïve', 2015: 20 [italics added]).

As previously noted, it is not that representations of successful female athletes reflects a discursive challenge to established representations, but that such

representations should always be conceived relationally and predicated upon balances of power. While the above examples could be viewed as reflecting a positive portrayal of women's sport, it fails to offer any wider challenge to gender dynamics, and only offers an 'exemplar' of how 'certain' women, who perform in 'certain' ways, are able to transcend established gendered representations. The potential here is that positive portrayals of female athletic success can in turn become markers of appropriate feminine qualities and a standard from which all women are subsequently judged by.

Moreover, it is not simply the case that 'certain' women are successful in challenging and transgressing 'established' gender boundaries but that 'women involved in sport have an additional burden of *not transgressing* boundaries of gender' (Washington and Enonomides, 2016: 147 [italics added]). Accordingly, such transgression was often tempered within the English press via comparisons that discursively represented women's football and the women's team in relation to men's football and the men's team, highlighting the ways in which newspaper reports 'relationally' framed gender in accordance with an established male standard. This was also evident in the 'influence' of certain males on the women's game.

In addition to numerous articles that opted for analyses of the England manager, Mark Sampson – as opposed to the players themselves – and in light of Moore's (2015a) assertion that women's football and the World Cup rested on the financial support of the male game; the success of the women's team was frequently attributed to

the tactical and managerial abilities of specific ‘men’ (Leighton, 2015d). Taylor (2015b: 4) stated that:

England’s cause is perhaps helped by the fact that Bronze is – along with the captain Steph Houghton, goalkeeper Karen Bardsley, Toni Duggan and Jill Scott – one of five [Manchester] City players in the squad. That quintet benefit from regular coaching sessions from Rodolfo Borrell, City’s global technical director who during a prolonged stint at Barcelona helped develop Lionel Messi and Andrés Iniesta. (see also Leighton 2015a, 2015c, Walters 2015c)

As noted by Elias and Scotson (1994), one important dynamic within the relations between established and outsider groups is that power inequalities result in outsider groups internalizing established standards. In this study, however, such inequality was prevalent in the missing representation of any significant role model for female footballers. This is not to suggest that women’s football in England does not have any female role models, but, instead, highlights that it was professional male footballers who provided the standards of achievement that the female players respected. Referencing England forward Jodie Taylor, Boyall (2015: 54) noted how ‘top players like Wayne Rooney were idols to England’s Lionesses’. Such comments reinforced the women’s ‘outsider’ status.

These examples could also elicit another important dynamic in the press' framing in that a sense of surprise towards the women's success and a subtle 'patronising' discourse could be identified. For example:

At a cursory glance, it didn't look like this summer's sporting calendar had too much to become excited about. No Olympics, no men's football tournaments: the two most reliable suppliers of those cherished moments of collective chest-beating and handwringing. ... And yet, this summer is already looking like a vintage one. It has thrown up numerous moments of *unanticipated overachievement* and heartbreaking drama. All of those elements have been in abundance at the women's World Cup in Canada. ("This could become", 2015: 35 [italics added])

The 'unanticipated overachievement' of the women's team was echoed in the surprise which was given to the 'aggressive' football on display. Retired professional footballer, Jamie Redknapp, remarked that England's 'game against Canada was more aggressive than I expected' (2015: 77). Similar reports commented upon an injury sustained by Laura Bassett, with England defender, Alex Scott, writing:

Some people watching on TV and seeing photos in the papers will have been *shocked* at the injury Laura Bassett suffered when a stray French elbow caught her in the face ... That incident, and some of the tackles in the tournament, might *surprise* some people watching who may have not realised how physical the women's game is (2015: 9 [italics added]).

Similar accounts were made of Bronze's goal against Norway. White (2015: 12) exclaimed that 'What Bronze's goal did was make clear that, while clearly not competing at the same level as their male counterparts, the women were more than capable of producing glorious sporting theatre'. White (2015: 12) added, 'what Bronze did was demonstrate – for the first time for many – that this is not simply a grass-roots explosion but that the game at the top is worth watching. It is a spectacle, not just a pastime'. In sum, Platell's (2015: 18 [emphasis in original]) comments served as a pertinent example of the acknowledged ignorance which followed the women's team:

ON WEDNESDAY, I did something I almost never do. I stayed up late to watch a football match. Around 2.4 million Brits did the same, as it happens, cheering on the England Women's World Cup team in their semi-final with Japan. It wasn't patriotism in my case, but curiosity. The 'Lionesses', as they've been dubbed, were said to be changing the face of football in this country with their

recent run of form – so I thought I’d see what all the fuss was about. Like many, I was cynical. How could a bunch of girls, most of whom have day jobs and are semi-professional, play with speed and finesse? How could they ever compare with the men’s game? Like millions of sceptics, I was proved wrong.

In the above examples, it is possible to see how a rather casual infantilization of the women’s team (‘How could a bunch of girls’) was marked by a sense of ‘surprise’ towards their unexpected achievements and displayed aggression. This coalesced with the realization ‘that the game ... is *worth* watching’ and that ‘the women were more than capable’ (White, 2015: 12 [italics added]). Evidently, such examples were based upon the ‘realization’ that women’s football was *unknowingly* capable of such achievements.

Accordingly, there was a fine line between providing genuine praise, and, in some instances, presenting an overly patronizing account. This was commented upon by Kidd (2015: 51): ‘Reaction to England’s progress at the Women’s World Cup in Canada has been mixed – sinister hardcore misogyny on social media, with soft-core sexism and apathy in the mainstream now replaced by faintly patronising praise’. The extent to which such ‘praise’, in direct comparisons to the men’s game, maintained the women’s ‘outsider’ status was underlined by Norman (2015: 26) who remarked that, ‘What makes women’s football so enjoyable is the same lightness and purity that prevents it



being poisonously addictive'. Indeed, the "purity" of the women's game (Norman, 2015) was echoed by Taylor (2015d: 3 [italics added]), who added that, 'With female football still taking baby steps towards full professionalism, the sport *retains a certain innocence* long absent from its male equivalent'. Rather than the football being judged on its competitive merits, reports continued to compare it with the men's game:

The top women pros are roughly on the average wage which is a throwback to the days when footballers lived in the same world as the fans. Maybe that's why there is a modesty and honesty about the game. It's rare to see bad tackles, dissent, pettiness, rolling about, feigning injury or any form of cheating at this World Cup. (Reade, 2015: 55)

Consequently, despite many of the above comments reflecting positively on the female game, closer examination revealed that such comments remained indebted to a latent male established standard whose competitiveness and profitability was used as an opportunity to discursively frame the women's team as untainted by the lavish lifestyle and 'diving' of male football. Reade's (2015) remarks suggested that the 'modesty' and 'honesty' that was appropriated to the players was a result of their lower wages, comparative to men (Millard, 2015). This was justified by Moore (2015d: 10) who argued that 'The English especially love modest, lowly-paid winners'. As a result, 'the

amateurism and egalitarianism' (Norman, 2015: 26) and 'the honesty of the players' ("Basset shrugs off", 2015: 68), matched a tournament that was 'refreshingly free of diving, cheating, time wasting, referee haranguing, injury feigning and much of the gamesmanship that regular watchers of the men's game take, reluctantly, for granted' (Taylor, 2015d: 3 see also Walters 2015b). In fact, 'The Women's World Cup' was represented as 'an opportunity for FIFA to begin a period of renewal. It ought also to remind all football fans that there is so much more to the game than money, greed and arrogant men' ("The future of football", 2015: 2). Ultimately, this presented a picture of women's football as a 'purer', less-violent and more honest 'version' of the male game. This was reflected in references to the 'Sunday League' standard of the football, a shorthand for the amateurism of the women's game by comparing it to English amateur football leagues that are typically played on a Sunday ("A goal fest?", 2015; Liddle, 2015; Reade, 2015). In the following section, attention will turn to exploring how the English press, in light of the women's success, sought to re-establish the male game.

### **Re-establishing the established**

In commenting upon the performance of the England team and the World Cup in general, we highlight the following examples:

I hope I'm allowed to say this: from what I've seen so far of the Women's World Cup on the BBC, I haven't been greatly impressed. Or to maybe put it better: I haven't greatly enjoyed the football. I hope I'm not tarred as a male chauvinist for saying so, any more than pointing out that I prefer watching women's tennis to men's tennis – Andy Murray being excepted – would make me 'prejudiced' the other way. For me, women's football does not have the skill and poise and excitement that men's football enjoys. I soon get bored and reach for the remote. That said, the women's game can produce great players, such as the immense Rose Reilly, a Hampden hall of famer, who played for Reims and AC Milan, and was capped by both Scotland and Italy. If you are sincere, you should be allowed to freely like or dislike your sport. Sexism should not come into it. (Spiers, 2015: 20)

We are being sold the Women's World Cup for reasons of political correctness, I suspect, not because anyone seriously thinks it is an exciting spectacle full of robust power and silky skills. There seems to me something terribly patronising in this attitude, a demeaning and false equivalence is being posited with the men's game. (Liddle, 2015: 31)

Even mainstream columnists have been deriding the Women's World Cup as Sunday League-standard cack that's only being shown live on the BBC because of political correctness gone mad. (Reade, 2015: 55)

I'm not a chauvinist – outstanding sport, by women or men, is something that I can watch all day. The awesome Jessica Ennis-Hill and, before her, Denise Lewis in multi-event sports. What's not to like? Double gold for Kelly Holmes in the 2004 Olympics is one of those moments that made the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end, then watching the power of Serena Williams as she slaughters her opponents at Wimbledon is a joy to witness. (Redknapp, 2015: 77)

One particular feature that resonates from the above extracts is the reference to 'political correctness' (Liddle, 2015; Reade, 2015). This was alluded to in Spiers (2015) and Redknapp's (2015) concern that they would be labelled as 'male chauvinist(s)' for not liking women's football. Indeed, it has been noted how references to 'political correctness' work as a shorthand for the anxieties of dominant ('established') groups (Suhr and Johnson, 2003; Burdsey, 2011). Echoing the disclaimer, 'I am not a racist, but...' (Van Dijk, 2008), such remarks serve to mitigate between anti-racist or, in this case, misogynist claims, while latently framing derisions against 'political correctness'

as a virtue of ignorance. In the above examples, it appears that such concerns emerged from the forced encouragement to engage with the women's game and watch the England women's team (Spiers, 2015). Whereas such anxieties sit awkwardly with the lack of media coverage that is afforded female sport,<sup>7</sup> these concerns tended to emanate from the view that women's football was, despite its apparent lack of skill and excitement, being compared favorably to men's football (Liddle, 2015; Reade, 2015; Spiers, 2015). As a result, there was an assertion that the men's game had to be defended (Burdsey, 2011). This rested upon comments that sought to link the journalist's opinions with a broader sense of acknowledged support.

For example, note the following remarks, 'I know *we* have' (Spiers, 2015: 20 [italics added]), '*We* are being sold' (Liddle, 2015: 31 [italics added]) and 'Even mainstream columnists' (Reade, 2015: 55). In these examples, there is a sense that the views of each journalist were, in some way, justified by a wider, yet unsubstantiated, recognition. Liddle (2015: 31) added that:

Aside from myself, I do not know of a single person who has tuned in to the coverage on BBC2 and BBC3. And I know several women who didn't even know it was on and had not the slightest interest when informed of the fact.

Rather, these examples are reflective of the ‘common sense’ assumptions that pervade discussions on gender and sport (Channon and Matthews, 2015). The use of the plural pronoun ‘we’ (Liddle, 2015; Spiers, 2015) and the reference to ‘mainstream columnists’ (Reade, 2015) highlights how such views are accredited by, but also based upon, an established ‘common sense’ view of football. Indeed, as noted by Lawrence (2005: 46): ‘an appeal can act at one and the same time to foreclose any discussion about certain ideas and practices and to legitimate them’. This view was reinforced by Liddle’s (2015) assertion that ‘even women’ were not watching – an established assumption that was used to legitimize the criticisms made and defend him from accusations of misogyny.

Furthermore, rather than denigrating *all* female sport, Spiers (2015), and Redknapp (2015) argued that their criticisms were not reflective of their admiration for other female athletes or for women’s sport in general. Such assertions highlight how ‘outsider’ groups are often ‘divided by a segmented collection of rival sub-groups, inhibiting them from maintaining the same level of social cohesion as the established’ (Black, 2016a: 6). For example, in their analysis of migrant workers in Wales, Lever and Milbourne (2014) noted how segregated working practices confounded problems for migrant workers by maintaining their position as outsiders. Here, ‘a policy of divide and rule, whereby any gains each group could potentially obtain collectively ... [were] undermined by enforced intra-group competition’ (Lever and Milbourne 2014: 216).

Notably, a similar process of ‘intra-group competition’ could be identified in the comparisons made between individual female athletes and team sports. One effect of this process is that it can redirect attention to the inability of outsider groups to align with established views. In the process of ‘boundary-making’ the responsibility is latently placed on outsider groups to assimilate with established standards. Syed’s (2015: 64) remarks offer a useful insight into this process:

A couple of indisputable facts before I crack on with this column. First, women are not as good as men at football. This is something most people would agree with and could be decisively proved by pitting the England women’s team who have just reached the quarter-finals of the World Cup against the men’s team managed by Roy Hodgson. It would be rather one-sided. But here is another indisputable fact: the England men’s team from 1920 would also get a thrashing from the present men’s team. ... In men’s football, evolution has taken place in terms of physicality and soft skills. Players are fitter and faster; the first touch is more controlled; the passing is speedier. ... And this brings me back to women’s football. It is at a relatively early stage of evolution. This struck me forcibly yesterday while listening to female pioneers from just one generation ago talking on the radio about how they were scoffed at for kicking a ball around. It was considered unfeminine. It was seen as uncouth. They were often despised, not

just by men but by their fellow women. There were virtually no amateur women's clubs, let alone professional ones. There were few competitions. Many girls who loved the game were banned from playing by their parents.

Indeed, Syed's (2015) comments are insightful in a number of respects. As already highlighted, there is the uncritical acceptance of 'indisputable fact' that offers a definite consideration of the differences between men's and women's football. More importantly, however, was the way in which the men's 'established' game was provided an historical consideration that legitimized such difference. Despite Syed's (2015) veiled acknowledgement of the long-term difficulties that have faced women's sport, such difficulties were subsequently ignored as a *reason for* such difference.

Elsewhere, reports frequently placed the 'success' of women's football in England on the achievements of the women's squad. Moore (2015b: 60 [italics added]) noted that 'England *need* to come away from the game having proved to themselves they can compete with teams like France, and *convinced viewers back home that they are a team worth following*'. Taylor (2015c: 4) added that 'Everyone is acutely aware that getting past the quarter-finals for the first time in a World Cup would provide the English Women's Super League with an immense, much-needed boost'. This was compounded by the financial support that had been given to women's football in England:



The Football Association has invested considerable sums of money in the domestic women's game but crowds for the Women's Super League have risen more slowly than was hoped, meaning there is a certain pressure on the squad to complement off-field advances with on-pitch success. The greater investment can be traced through mattresses, airline seats and medical facilities. (Taylor, 2015a: 4)

Wider institutional constraints were all ignored and the onus placed on the players to meet established expectations was based on them proving that they were 'worth' watching (Moore, 2015b; White, 2015). Ignoring institutional constraints is reflected in wider discourses on women's sport, where the burden of inclusion and progression lies squarely with women as individuals and the accountability of sport's institutional structures and practices are minimised (Fielding-Lloyd and Meân, 2011).

The following discussion will outline how the history of women's football may offer the opportunity for outsider groups to challenge established opinions by examining how building and reintroducing a history of women's sport can help to promote women's football.

### **Challenging established discourses: re-introducing the history of women's football**

In the above analysis, we have outlined how established discourses work to interdependently represent and position outsider groups. This was evident in the extent to which women's football and the English women's team were subjected to various examples of 'outsidering' in the press' coverage. In part, this was achieved by drawing upon popular memories from the men's game, notably specific references to England's successes in the 1966 and 1990 World Cups. Evidently 'the established', in this instance, the male game/team:

share[s] [a] common history, or their perception of a common history, which helps to sustain their own sense of superiority and creates an us and them, insider outsider attitude. ... The generational transmission of such a shared history and experience keeps alive the social constructions of established and outsiders, long after the original constructors of such a view have passed on (Sutton and Vertigans, 2002: 62)<sup>8</sup>

Woodward (2016) notes how 'the legacy of memories of the pivotal moments, record breaking displays and the construction of male heroes of the sport in the history of the men's game' form part of 'public narratives', narratives that 'are largely absent in women's football' (2016: 3). Fielding-Lloyd and Meân (2013) identified that in media coverage of Team GB's 2012 Olympic football squads, narratives outlining the star

players and domestic club successes, which were typical for the men's team, were largely absent from the women's. Similarly, Sequerra (2014) identified that narratives establishing the long history of women's football and rivalries between certain clubs have been strikingly absent from the promotion of the WSL.

While analyses of the past can provide explanations for present inequalities (Woodward, 2016), historical reflections can also be used to discursively challenge established discourses. Indeed, there were some positive attempts within the English press to retell this history. Braden (2015: 32) noted:

One might think of women's football as a relatively recent phenomenon. But in 1920 a match featuring the Dick, Kerr Ladies – a team formed by workers at Dick, Kerr and Co Ltd, a munitions factory in Preston – drew a crowd of 53,000 to Everton's Goodison Park. So encouraged by this was the Football Association that it immediately banned women from playing in Football League stadiums on the basis that 'The game of football is quite unsuitable for females and ought not to be encouraged.' The ban would not be rescinded until 1970. (see also Taylor 2015a)

As evidenced by Braden (2015), these accounts center upon locating the historical legacy of the women's game in relation to present attempts to promote the WSL and the

England team. Accordingly, such comments reflected an attempt to give women's football a history; indeed, a history which during the 2015 World Cup was being *made* by the English women's team (Hope, 2015; Leighton, 2015e). This was acknowledged by Garside (2015: 16), who noted:

In football the male of the species has had a free run for the past 150 years. We are in the early chapters in the narrative of the women's game. Imagine how different the world of women's football might look when we are commemorating the World Cup centenary in 2091. My guess would be that England's women might be celebrating more than one success.

Much of this potential, however, rests upon distinguishing the women's game on its own merits. While 'Comparisons with the men's game are irrelevant, since women are playing against each other' (Garside, 2015: 16) and when 'England can be criticised without this being seen as a trashing of women's football in general' (Kidd, 2015: 51), then more deliberate attempts to dissociate it from the men's game can be made. Consider the following comments by Northcroft (2015: 17):

Italia '90 comparisons are being drawn. They are tempting: the tears, the sheer cruel luck, Bassett as Paul Gascoigne, a leading England player crumpled in

defeat. But comparisons are wrong. Thinking of the women's game in men's game terms almost always is. Behind the Italia '90 parallel is the notion that England's Lionesses will have their sport revolutionised just as their male counterparts did. The new audiences drawn by the 1990 World Cup encouraged the creation of the Premier League. Nothing so big can happen. But it does not need to. Progress requires a sustainable pace. English women's football is already advancing nicely, step by step by step.

What is of importance, therefore, is that such advancements are promoted within media accounts. This is not intended as an all-encompassing solution to gender inequality in sport. Rather, it suggests that gender representations are historically specific and that these representations can enunciate particular strategies that offer the opportunity to challenge contemporary power relations. Memories are closely tied to the historical experience of particular groups, offering a source of significance and orientation that supports collective action. These memories are historically shaped under different circumstances, yet, they are also open to the possibility of being (re)constructed in accordance with changing relations. One way of making these changes visible is by locating present successes in relation to the past.

## **Conclusion**

The 2015 Women's World Cup allowed us to explore how changes in the way female athletes were portrayed within the English press related to broader changes in an expanding women's game and a third place medal at the World Cup. It has been revealed that English newspaper discourses worked to discursively represent the women's team and game in relation to an established dominant male standard, while also framing their success through patronizing discourses that were grounded in a sense of 'surprise' at their achievements. Subsequently, despite their success, the use of 'common sense' assumptions discursively positioned the women as 'outsiders'. This served to re-establish men's football as superior, culturally salient and, in some cases, better than the women's team/game.

Indeed, as evidenced from newspapers used in this study, the majority of sports writers who reported on the women's world cup were men. Whereas this points to the need for greater gender diversity in sports journalism, a widely acknowledged conclusion (Hardin and Shain, 2006; Miller and Miller, 1995), it is our contention that attempts to build and, in many instances, rediscover the history of women's football can help to challenge established cultural representations that draw exclusively from the history of the men's game. As highlighted in this article, while the development of women's football was stunted in 1921, preceding this, the women's game reveals an illustrious history contiguous with public efforts to support British troops during the

First World War and the, then, growing popularity of the women's' game, as evidenced in the large crowds that attended Goodison Park in 1920.

Whereas this history points to the unacknowledged importance played by memory, it also highlights the significance of the 2015 World Cup for women's football. That is, although memories are often shaped via particular narratives that support established groups, established discourses can be challenged by paying attention to the ways in which particular events are 'remembered' and the particular significances that these memories hold.

To this extent, the 2015 Women's World Cup provided a historical moment from which the women's game could be relocated in a context of popular culture. For this to occur, however, such successes need to be embedded in the social, political and cultural history of the women's game. By 'making history' but also by acknowledging this history, more progressive attempts to promote and 'know' women's sport can begin.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> In this instance, we are not suggesting that Foucault was ignorant towards ‘power relations’. In fact, Foucault (1994: 11) stated that power was, for him, ‘a short cut to the expression I always use: the relationships of power’. Instead, what is emphasized in our discussion is that rather than reifying ‘power’, power can be interdependently recognised in, and, viewed as a formative part of, human relationships. As Heinich (2013) notes, ‘We certainly depend on those who have the power to recognize us, but this power is itself subordinate to our capacity to recognize it as relevant’.

<sup>2</sup> This included Sunday editions.

<sup>3</sup> Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales all have their own ‘national’ newspapers; such as, the *Herald*, which is published in Scotland. National variations of popular British/English newspapers; such as, *The Daily Telegraph*, have a ‘Scottish edition’, published in Scotland.

<sup>4</sup> Newspaper circulation refers to the number of copies that a newspaper distributes on an average day.

<sup>5</sup> These figures were drawn from the Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC) and were released in January 2017 (Ponsford, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> The ‘full 90 minutes’ was in reference to England’s semi-final against Japan.



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<sup>7</sup> For the World Cup, the majority of the games were televised on BBC Three, a now online-only BBC channel, with the semi-final game being moved to BBC Two.

<sup>8</sup> A similar occurrence has been noted in analyses of ‘race’ and national identity. Indeed, Leddy-Owen (2014: 1462 [italics added]) highlights how ‘the distance between those accepted or not accepted as English is ... measured by a tacit essentializing logic in which difference is marked and fixed by notions of *ancestry* inflected by evaluations based on skin colour’.

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