

Women's World Cup: France 2019 will show how far women's game has come and how far is left to go

Much has changed in last four years but struggle for recognition goes on

Mark Critchley, 07/06/2019

The Guardian

How much progress has there been within women's football since the first official Women's World Cup in 1991? Well, for starters, this 2019 edition will actually be known as the 'Women's World Cup'. 28 years ago, a tentative Fifa would not call it that. Instead, thanks to a commercial tie-up with confectionery giant Mars, the inaugural tournament was known as the '1st FIFA World Championship for Women's Football for the M&M's Cup'.

Held in China, with little of the planning and infrastructure provided for today's competitions, matches were also only 80 minutes long. It seemed organisers were concerned that another 10 minutes might prove too much for the players to cope with. The woman who would lift the trophy, United States captain April Heinrichs, summed this attitude up neatly in an interview with *Sports Illustrated*: "They were afraid our ovaries were going to fall out if we played 90."

The story of the World Cup in the years since is one of gradual growth. Attendances have fluctuated, rising and falling between each tournament, but Canada 2015 attracted a record 1.35m spectators and France 2019 is expected to build upon that. Another billion pairs of eyes will watch on television. Meanwhile, more nations than ever before have applied to host the 2023 finals, with even a joint bid by North and South Korea planned.

But perhaps the clearest sign of progress is the increased level of competition. You need three hands to count the number of teams that will travel to France with realistic hopes of becoming world champions. All of them – including England, under the stewardship of Phil Neville – have their flaws and foibles, but all have also benefitted from the increased interest and investment in the women's game over the last four years.

And yet, claims that the sport is approaching an equal footing with the men's game need to be challenged. This is, after all, a World Cup that will be without its best player. Ada Hegerberg has not played for Norway since 2017. The recipient of the inaugural Ballon d'Or Féminin is effectively on strike at international level as she feels that her federation fails to create an environment where she and other women can succeed.

It is also a World Cup where the holders and favourites – the United States – are suing their own governing body, alleging "institutionalised gender discrimination" and seeking equal treatment with their less successful male counterparts. Theirs and Hegerberg's protests are the most high-profile disputes in international women's football, but they are by no means the only ones among this tournament's 24 qualifiers.

France's Men Won the World Cup Last Summer. Its Women Want a Title to Match.

By Christopher Clarey, June 6, 2019 (*The New York Times*)

ORLÉANS, France — The first Women's World Cup on French soil was only days away, and Delphine Cascarino, a 22-year-old French wing with the speed and dribbling skills to become a breakout star over the next month, was about to exit the cozy stadium in Orléans where the French team had beaten Thailand, 3-0, in a friendly match. But first she had one last stop to make: A group of about 200 fans, mostly young girls, was waiting for Cascarino and her teammates outside for autographs and pictures. "We can sense the French public is really here for us and behind us," Cascarino said. "We know what a big opportunity this is."

This summer's World Cup, which begins Friday with host France facing South Korea in the Parc des Princes in Paris, is an unprecedented chance for women's soccer to reach a wider audience at home.

The tournament comes one year after France's men's team won the World Cup for the second time, sparking celebrations throughout the country and a renewed sense of France's ability to bridge societal divides for a common cause.

The halo effect of that triumph has since dissipated amid a wave of protests and smashed shop windows in major cities led by members of the yellow-vest movement, but in addition to providing another chance to emphasize unity, this home World Cup is a fresh opportunity to banish some of the stereotypes that linger about women's soccer in France.

The French Football Federation is not hesitating to build a bridge between the tournaments — one of the federation's commercial partners is running a marketing campaign under the slogan, "Don't wait for 2022 to relive 2018" — even if some of the women's team's leaders, like striker Eugénie Le Sommer and others, profess frustration with the constant comparisons between men's and women's soccer.

"We don't talk much about the guys, so as not to put too much pressure on ourselves," said Amandine Henry, the captain of the French team. "But we do want to ride the wave of their success. We have seen so many emotions in the country last year. We want to experience something similar."

But can women's soccer, long of minor interest in France, truly become a national focal point or, better yet, a rallying point?

"Much will depend of course on how the French team performs," said Vincent Duluc, a journalist at France's sports daily *L'Equipe* who is widely considered the country's top soccer writer. "But what I do know is that the French media will play the game like they have never played it before."

For the first time at a World Cup, the French women's team's games and the final rounds of the tournament will be broadcast on TF1, the nation's leading free-to-air network. TF1 will use the same main commentary duo for the French women's matches that it uses for the men's matches: the commentator Gregoire Margotton and the former France star Bixente Lizarazu.

Women's World Cup becomes platform for social change

USA Today, 09/06/2019

Seizing on the once in every four years spectacle, teams at the Women's World Cup are hoping that the attention the sport will get in France will bring about change at home. But it's not just about soccer. It's about respect.

For the defending champion U.S. women's team, that means a focus on the players' fight for equitable pay. For Australia, that means increased prize money for the most prestigious tournament in women's soccer. And for Jamaica, it means more support for the athletes from a federation that let the team go unfunded, and as a result, dormant, for years.

"It certainly is a platform. It's the biggest stage that we have," Megan Rapinoe said while discussing the U.S. team's ongoing fight. "It's a balance, though, because first and foremost, I think we have this platform and it's as big as it has been because we've been so successful, and on the biggest stages we've been successful." The U.S. is the defending champion and a three-time winner of the World Cup, which kicks off Friday in Paris. Twenty-four teams will crisscross France over the next month, with the winner decided in Lyon on July 7.

Jamaica, the first Caribbean nation to qualify for a Women's World Cup, is among those teams. The Reggae Girlz want to change the perception of the women's game in a nation that traditionally hasn't valued it: Funding was cut when the team didn't qualify for the 2008 Olympics. The team was revived just five years ago. Like many teams in the region, Jamaica's women have struggled for basic support, even equipment. There's been little or no compensation for players. Coach Hue Menzies said the team's first-ever appearance in the World Cup is "actually a cause." "We want to make an impact socially," Menzies said.

The Americans are largely seen as the leaders when it comes to tackling equity issues — using their status as the top-ranked team in the world. Players have filed a federal lawsuit that accuses the U.S. Soccer federation of discrimination and seeks compensation that's equitable with compensation for the men's national team. U.S. defender Becky Sauerbrunn sees this World Cup as a turning point. "I think we have so much further to go, but I think we're at that point right now where, for women's soccer and for this tournament, it's, 'How much can we push this and raise this further? How much more can we get the neutral fan to become the die-hard fan?' Can we get the investors to go from 'Maybe we'll invest in this,' to 'We're absolutely investing in this because we see this as an untapped marketplace?' So I think this is kind of a critical point for us where we can really take some strides that maybe we wouldn't be able to in a non-World Cup year," Sauerbrunn said.

Women's World Cup 2019: Could this be a landmark moment for French sport and culture?

By Ingrid Therwath, BBC Sport in Paris, France

Excitement is building in France as the country prepares to host the Women's World Cup for the first time. "I can't wait. I've been waiting for this for a very long time," says eight-year-old Garance when I mention the Women's World Cup, which will be held in France from 7 June to 7 July.

The young midfielder, who started playing football a year ago with a Paris-based mixed-sex junior team, has only been aware of the competition for a comparatively short time. But her enthusiasm is nonetheless very real and shared by many women who have long endeavoured to put female football on the mental and financial map of professional and amateur sports in France.

For all of them, and for many French sport fans, the 2019 Women's World Cup marks the coming of age of female football in their country. "The World Cup is going to change a lot of things for women's football, whether it's in France or in the rest of the world," Lyon and France midfielder Eugenie Le Sommer told BBC Sport.

The significance for the hosts comes from the fact that France, which proudly boasts of being a two-time winner of the men's version of this event, has not always held a positive view of women playing football.

The Division 1 Feminine - the highest level of women's football in the country - was founded in 1918 and, in 1920, about 25,000 spectators gathered to watch a game between the women's teams of France and England. But in 1932, the league was discontinued and in 1940, the pro-Nazi Vichy regime banned women from playing altogether, even as amateurs.

For decades afterwards, football remained a solely male bastion.

Ghislaine Royer-Souef was 15 years old in 1968 when she came across an advert asking for young female football players in the local newspaper.

Three years later, in 1971, her team put pressure on the French Football Federation (FFF) to recognise them as the official national women's team. In 1974, the Division 1 Feminine was finally reinstated and Royer-Souef went on to win three national championship titles.

"Football is a symbol because there weren't that many sports that women could play," she says. "Football was not for women, yet many women were playing. We were pioneers without even realising it at the time. We gave female football a new life after the 1940 ban. It's only been roughly 10 years since female football took off and I realise the role I played. I am one of the pioneers. I was part of the first training sessions. I am now a symbol of the renewal of female football in France."

She remembers hearing many sexist remarks from men around her, both in and out of the stadium, when she started her career. During a 1969 interview, a journalist asked her to answer his questions while ironing her family's clothes. She now laughs about it and points out that "we were not feminists; we only wanted to play".

Act of homophobic vandalism leads to further push for inclusion in sport

James Norman, Tue 26 Feb 2019

David Kyle says he has become an ally and advocate of Pride Cups almost by default. As president of the North Gippsland Football League in country Victoria, Kyle says he became motivated to become a more vocal advocate for LGBTI inclusion when he witnessed what he took to be a homophobic response to the club's first Pride Cup match in 2016 between local teams Glengarry and Traralgon Tyres United.

When Dean Sutton – a local LGBTI community member working with the league on the Pride Cup – hung rainbow flags in the main street of the tiny town of Glengarry, the flags were torn down and destroyed just hours later. “Seeing that negative response was probably the catalyst that made us realise we needed to keep moving forward with our inclusion policies, take more of a stand, and start the education process,” Kyle says. “The support mechanisms or acceptance down here are not the same as Collins Street in Melbourne – so we needed to deal with some very old and long held cultural views.”

This week, in a broad ranging push for LGBTI inclusion in sport, CEOs of several Victorian sporting organisations – including Australian rules football, tennis, rugby, cricket, football, netball and gymnastics – made a “pledge of pride”, welcoming members into clubs regardless of sexuality or gender identity. The CEOs from across the full gamut of sporting codes expressed a common sentiment that their sports should be open to all Australians and that sexuality and gender should never be a roadblock. “Hockey Victoria and our community has been a strong advocate for celebrating sexual and gender diversity for close to a decade,” says Hockey Victoria CEO Andrew Skillern. “The collaboration with other codes is vital to ensure we all show what can be done by celebrating diversity together.”

A recent Out on the Fields study found that 80% of Australians have experienced or witnessed homophobia in sport, including slurs such as “faggot” or “dyke”; 75% believe openly gay spectators would not be safe at a sporting event, and 87% of young gay men and 75% of young gay women remain in the closet while playing sport. Since the first Pride Cup was held in Yarra Glen in 2014, there are now more than 30 sporting clubs registered to stage their own versions. The movement formed after former Yarra Glen football club player Jason Ball came out as gay in 2012, spearheading a national campaign to tackle homophobia in sport, culminating in the founding of Pride Cup Australia.

Pride Cup Australia and VicHealth also launched a new handbook this week as a resource offering case-studies, tips and real-life scenarios for local and national sporting organisations to create successful, inclusive and meaningful Pride Cups in their communities.