

Module 3. Creating women footballer icons. Building tomorrow's football stars

Sport offers a wide range of opportunities to brands. A sponsor can include their icon on the athletes' uniforms, carry out merchandising actions on the game-day or in alternative events, place static and dynamic advertising in sports arenas, create sports products or even name a football club after the company. Sport is also an excellent way for medium and small companies to strengthen the brand's image in the local community by investing in regional sponsorship. In the previous module, we showed how these options exist because of the incredible popularity of sports – and how football offers the most prolific opportunities in the sports sector. This module focuses on the opportunities and strategies clubs and leagues can explore to create inspirational icons in women's football. We will discuss the historical challenges and the exciting prospects of promoting the next generation of global football stars.

According to Nielsen (World Football Report, 2018), 40 % of people aged 16 and over, living in the world's main population centres, consider themselves interested or very interested in football. They are also more interested in watching football than any other sport. There is a growing commercial interest in women's football, with game-day attendance showing incredible potential. In addition, broadcaster viewership is increasing, and many new sponsors have appeared recently as high-profile partners, such as Visa and UEFA's 7-year agreement for the sponsorship of the Women's Champions League, and other UEFA competitions. These changes can be explored as opportunities for alternative investments, mainly because they offer an option for the costly and saturated sponsorship deals within men's football. Brands that invest in athlete sponsorship and endorsement will have the opportunity to stand out from the crowd and benefit from earlier adoption.

Women's growing interest in football is a critical part of any expansion strategy in the sector because content creators and sponsors have neglected this group, missing valuable opportunities to turn them into loyal fans. Regarding major football events such as the FIFA World Cup, up to 34 % of women have an interest in the competitions, but still encounter barriers to watching the games, acquiring sporting kits and other merchandise and identifying players (What fans want, 2022). Furthermore, fans know that several gender-based inequalities affect women footballers, and female athletes have been coming forward to expose low pay and lack of contractual support. In fact, 89 % of female



footballers consider abandoning their professional sports careers (Koukiadaki and Pearson, 2019).

Historical challenges

Football is the most popular sport in the world. However, for some commentators, the disparities in media coverage, funding and recognition between men's and women's football create complex dynamics (Garland *et al.*, 2013; Varona, 2004). Some argue that this scenario of disparities goes back to the problematic insertion of women in typically masculine spaces such as sports (Hargreaves, 2002). The segregation of women from the practice of physical activities and sports dates back to Ancient Greece. Under the argument that women should not become masculinised or that supposedly they would not have the physiological conditions to do so, free access to sports was widely denied to women for centuries.

It was not until the 20th century that women's sports gained some visibility and stability. Athletes competing in individual sports such as swimming, tennis, golf and gymnastics gained international visibility. For team sports, the great novelty was the creation of the first women's professional sports league, the All American Girls Professional Baseball League in the United States. Even though women still had to conform to strict dress and behaviour standards, participation in sport and professionalisation was considered radical at the time.

Suzanne Lenglen: an icon in and out of her sport

Before Serena Williams, Naomi Osaka and Maria Sharapova enchanted the public, the tennis world already had its biggest star. Suzanne Lenglen was an icon, not only for the lightness and agility on the courts, but also for overcoming prejudices when sports were the exclusive territory of the male audience.

Known as the goddess of tennis (la Divine), Suzanne first started practising tennis to deal with asthma episodes. At 11, she won her first racket and started playing on the clay court built in her backyard in the French countryside. Seeing the daughter's talent, her father soon became her coach and took her to the Nice Lawn Tennis Club. Success came quickly. When she was 15 years old, Suzanne reached the final of Roland Garros.

After World War I, the new French star did not stop shining. Between 1914 and 1926, Suzanne won 31 Grand Slam titles: 16 at Roland Garros and 15 at Wimbledon. She won 241 tournaments and became the world's No. 1 tennis player for six consecutive years, soon after the world rankings emerged. To complete her successful career, during the 1920 Olympic Games in Antwerp, Suzanne won a gold medal (singles and mixed doubles) and a bronze medal in doubles.

With a powerful serve and an accurate tactic, the French tennis player could predict her opponents' reaction and thus take a significant advantage on the courts. But she was not just known for her talent. La Divine revolutionised the fashion world. In the 1920s,



Suzanne was the first tennis player to wear shorter skirts to facilitate movement during the match and thus became the muse of Jean Patou, a renowned French stylist and specialist in sports collections. Among her most famous pieces that have marked the history of tennis are the knee-length silk skirts and tulle sashes, created especially for Suzanne. Before long, there were more books on women's fashion 'on the court' than records of her outstanding sports achievements.

Figure 1. Suzanne Lenglen



Source: [online image of Suzanne Lenglen], (n. d.), <https://bbc.in/3RUNmB3>.

Independent as few women of her time, Suzanne drank, hung out with several tennis players and wore nothing under the long skirt of her uniform (Bouchier and Findling, 1983) – attitudes that were in tune with her revolutionary game on the court [see more here: British Pathé, (2015)].

After her brilliant career as a professional player, 'la Divine' worked in a sportswear store and opened her tennis school. The last days of her life were as intense as her athletic success. In 1938, Suzanne was diagnosed with leukaemia, became blind, and died shortly after that.

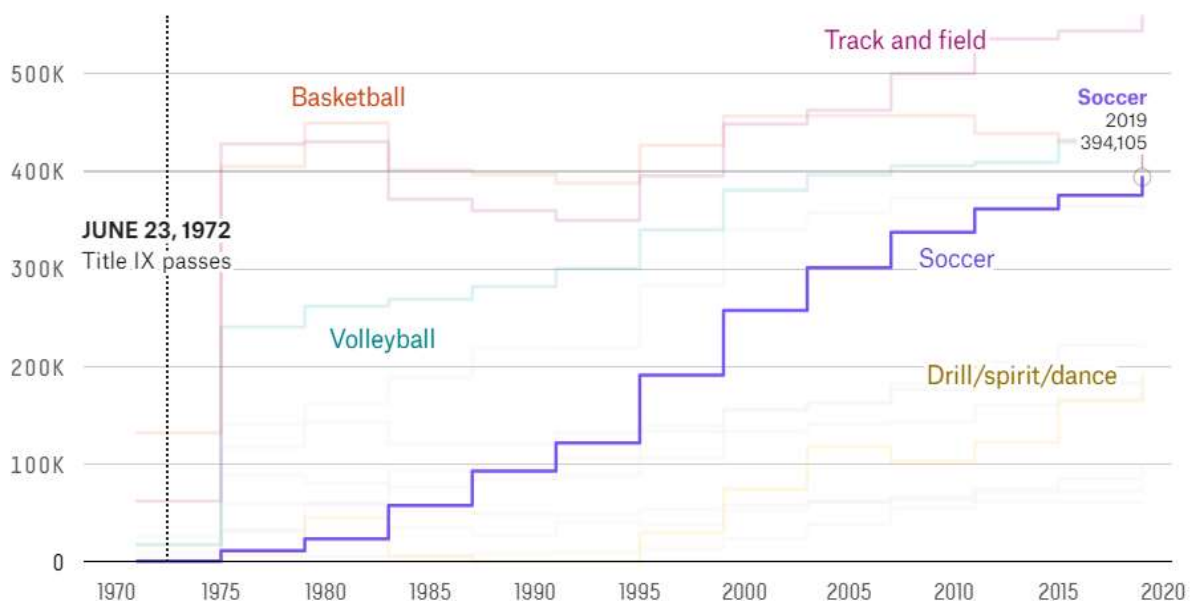
In 1978, the goddess became the first female tennis star to enter the International Tennis Hall of Fame. Her status of sports myth, French icon and playing style was immortalised, and, to this day, her movements are known as the ballet steps. She is iconic not only for her contributions to the sport, but for her enormous impact on the broader culture, paving the way for other athletes and many other women.

Despite the improved representation of women in the sports scene, participation in sports traditionally reserved for men remained controversial. In some countries, the barriers to

participation included decrees that prohibited women from participating in 'men's sports'. In Brazil, between 1941 and 1979, women were banned from playing football, rugby, water polo and wrestling. In this context of struggle and resistance to overcome stereotypes, prejudice and exclusion, women continued to challenge social prescriptions about what was considered feminine. The advance of the feminist movement in the 1960s and of the gender equality discourse was fundamental for athletes to be able to express competitiveness, determination, and excellence through sport.

In the United States, as part of the broader Education Amendment in 1972, the enactment of Title IX ushered in a new era for female students in American high schools and universities. The law prohibiting sex-based exclusion required the same financial support for women's and men's sports programs. This determination not only exponentially increased the participation of women in school and university sports but also fostered the creation of scholarships for female student-athletes in the 50 years since. Title XI had an expectedly positive impact on women's football in the United States. Under pressure to comply with the new legislation, sports administrators saw the opportunity to promote football because of its cost-effectiveness (Petri, 2022). The sport was considered relatively easy to learn, required little investment in new facilities and equipment, and attracted many international talent willing to move to the United States. Women's football took off after Title XI passed, moving from zero (1971) to 394,105 student-athletes (2019).

Figure 2. Evolution of female participation in football (soccer) from 1971 to 2019



Source: Paine, 2022, <https://53eig.ht/3xAlEla>.

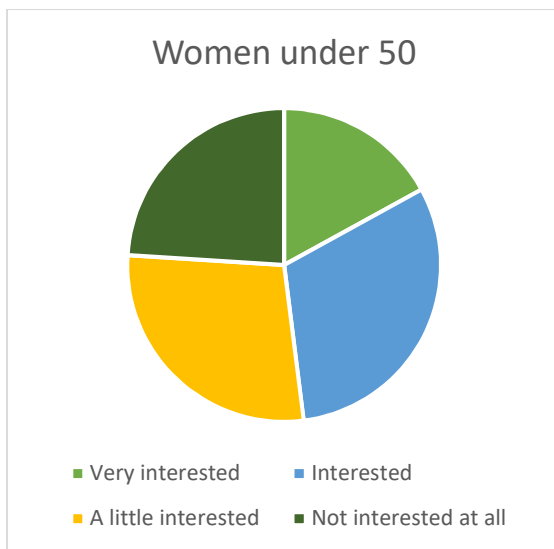
Besides Title XI, in the United Kingdom, the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act guaranteed the protection of women from any form of discrimination based on marital status and sex, and the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) was established to work on eliminating gender inequalities. Today, many women who have benefited from these legal changes



can celebrate a new era of sports participation for their daughters, nieces, and granddaughters. They can encourage the participation of girls and adolescents in sports because of their positive lived experiences in sport and their understanding of the struggles for equal access in the sports arena.

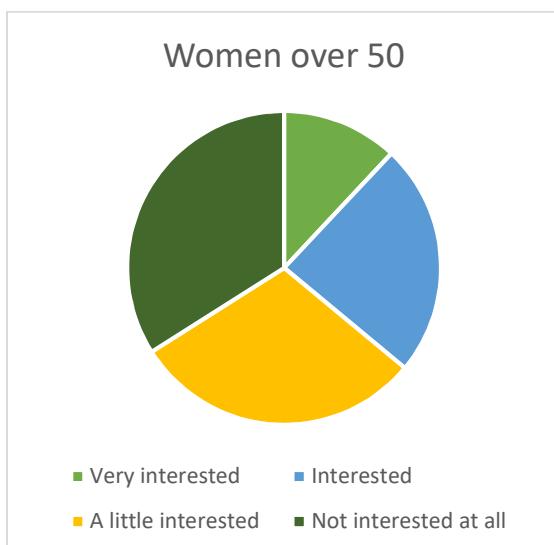
There has always been a correlational link between sports participation and interest in sport (Deaner *et al.*, 2016). In figure 3 and 4 below, we see that 64 % of those women born before the anti-discrimination era have little to no interest in the sport. Not surprisingly, women's sport has been recognised for its social and political relevance for emancipation and gender equality. Women's football, the fastest-growing sport in the world, presents the young generations with many champions who advocate for equal opportunities and equal pay on and out of the pitches (Why Women's Football, 2022).

Figure 3. Percentage of women's interest in sports across two generations



Source: Iberdrola, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3Bwt9ui>.

Figure 4. Percentage of women's interest in sports across two generations



Source: Iberdrola, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3Bwt9ui>.

Creating sporting icons

Professional sporting events are spectacles, and function as full public displays of skill, technical competence, athletics, competitiveness, power, courage, and commitment. Few cultural events are comparable to the magnitude and diversity of the aesthetic experience and commotion that the sporting spectacle can promote (Cashmore, 2000). The sporting spectacle is only possible because of the media complex covering the events. Without it, fans' widespread passion and loyalty would be greatly compromised, and athletes would have little opportunity to become true sporting legends.

High-profile sporting personalities are often well recognised in popular culture. They appear on television, billboards and on social media and are known not only for their athletic achievements, but also because of their acquired fame and/or celebrity status. The popularity of athletes is far from being a recent trend. Athletes have always been perceived as heroes by the general public and the media. We all know how sports are appealing, but we often forget how important the narratives are in creating any sports spectacle. Athletes are described as heroes for the remarkable moments they help to make, which contributes to a sense of community and shared experience. Besides the attention that athletes can gather by their sporting skills, superior technique, athletic feats and performance and competitive attitude, they can also captivate a legion of fans interested in their attitudes, routine, and interests outside the realm of sport.

Rojek (2001) identifies three historical processes that contribute to our contemporary notion of what a celebrity might be:

- the democratisation of society;
- the decline of organised religion;
- the commodification of everyday life.

The democratisation of society refers to the relative shifts away from traditional institutional figures that used to serve as the primary references, such as the monarchy. Nowadays, these conventional holders of power receive much less reverence and attention from the general public, who have become much more drawn to celebrities of all types. Similarly, the idea of sacredness extrapolated the boundaries of religion, and people can be devoted to and worship mass-media celebrities. Finally, fans become avid consumers of commodified celebrities, trying to replicate their steps, tastes, and habits. These dramatic societal changes created a context in which celebrities are perceived as references, authorities, and influencers.

The sports system has been able to adapt to several changes in the world socioeconomic scenario. Sports are still recognised for maintaining a degree of authenticity that lends credibility to the industry and athletes. In an era dominated by inauthentic, false, virtual and massified demonstrations, the appeal of the spontaneity of the sporting spectacle



only increases. The athletes, great stars of this show, are captured live. Thus, even after the editing and content creation process (selection of images, framing, editing, commentary, close-ups, replays, studies and interviews), the sports product continues to be scrutinised by the public as a genuine and authentic product, which cannot be controlled or predicted.

The unpredictability of sport is a great ingredient to sacralise athletes, their acts of courage, mastery, resilience, and determination. The uniqueness of the sports and the unrivalled quality of sports authenticity turn it into a popular cultural appeal. Ultimately, it is through the exceptional quality of their performances and media coverage that athletes or individuals are generally widely known and acquired star status.

Female athletes have always struggled with issues of representation. Several specialists have criticised the media for exploiting the image of athletes, focusing primarily on their appearance, perceived feminine attitudes, and social roles outside of sport (as mothers, daughters, wives) rather than celebrating their athletic success (Fink, 2015). The main argument is that the media complex increasingly emphasises male athleticism. At the same time, female athletes are underrepresented and often have their performances put in the background of the sports stories (Cooky *et al.*, 2015). For these commentators, beyond the need to address the lack of coverage of women's sports, there is an urgent need to create verbal and visual narratives that focus on the performance of female athletes (Daniels, 2009).

On many occasions, the popularised representations of female athletes have been stereotyped and overly sexualised, with little focus on their athletic identities. Sporting performances have a recognised and unique commercial value because of their association with ideas of transcendence. When athletes perform, they push the boundaries of what is possible, which has a great inspirational effect. However, with women athletes, many sponsors ignore this potential and rely instead on the benefits of associating their products/services with someone with a public profile and attractive figure. Athletes and football organisations have also reproduced this paradox, wasting the chance of capitalising on women's athleticism.

In the 1990s, athletes and teams aimed to challenge the labels that portrayed female players as unattractive and masculine. Some also tried to attract more attention to women's football, as the media and the general public largely ignored its importance and relevance. Some athletes attempted to tackle the issue of unequal media coverage by trying extreme alternatives. Following the steps of Norwegian players who had posed for a television tabloid magazine before, twelve Matildas (@matildas) posed nude for a black and white calendar to raise funds for the team and promote awareness of women's football. The team was significantly underfunded, and the games were mostly unattended. Hence, the campaign's goal was to bring attention to the team as part of the preparation for the Sydney 2000 Summer Olympics.



Arguably, these female athletes could not use their sporting success in exchange for more space and attention from the sports media complex. While it was also their choice to challenge stereotypes about gender expression and sexuality, self-objectification seems to have been the only way to gain attention. This lack of recognition these athletes faced says a lot about how limited the options for female athletes were then. Nowadays, fans are critical of campaigns that place a disproportional focus on the sexualisation of female athletes rather than their athletic status and performance. There is a much better understanding of professional players' social and financial challenges, and the youngest generations are unwilling to support the objectification of athletes.

Figure 5. Alicia 'Eesh' Ferguson of the Matildas with the 2000 calendar

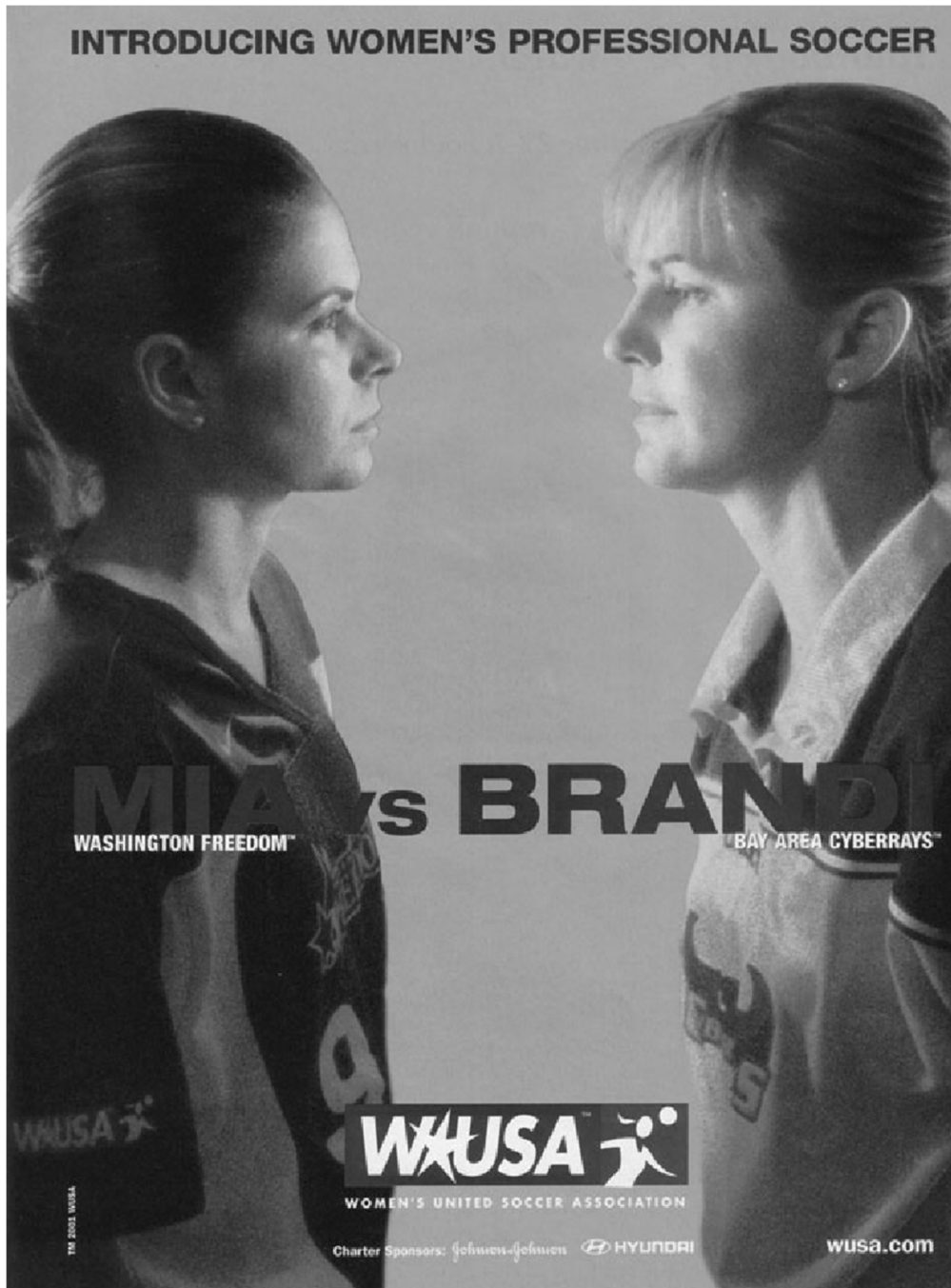


Source: Arciuli, 2019, <https://bit.ly/3dpgTUu>.

In 2001, Women's United Soccer Association, the governing body responsible for women's football in the United States, featured a campaign promoting women's professional football in Sports Illustrated for Women. The ad included the two most famous national team players: Mia Hamm (@miahamm) and Brandi Chastain (@brandichastain). They both advocated for better pay and benefits for the national team, using their heroine status to push a collective agenda. These athletes also played a pivotal role in constructing

new representations of female players in the media. They both criticised the negativity towards female players and worked as advocates for equality and respect in football.

Figure 6. Ad for women's professional soccer debut in Sports Illustrated for Women (March 2001)



Source: Author of the image, date of publication, page No./short link.

This campaign is an example of how the United States players managed to create a space in the media culture to tackle the inequality in football. These attempts are never free of problems and limitations, but are an effective way for athletes to exercise their advocacy rights and position themselves as socially engaged players. Not so long before this

campaign, Brandi Chastain was extensively criticised for her ferocious celebration of the game-winning penalty-kick goal in the World Cup final against China. She tore off her jersey after scoring the goal, creating one of the most iconic sporting scenes. Even though men had done this for years, her gesture divided opinions, with some arguing that she had exceeded the limits of what was appropriate behaviour in a football match (Saletan, 1999).

Figure 7. Brandi Chastain celebrates the victory of the US team in the 1999 FIFA Women's World Cup



Source: [online image of Brandi Chastain celebrating the victory of the US team in the 1999 FIFA Women's World Cup], (n. d.), <https://bit.ly/3S9CcZe>.

Regardless, it is fundamental to recognise that the image of Chastain on the floor occupies a powerful motivational narrative that can be mobilised to inspire and provide meaningful identification with her emotions, strength, and spontaneity. Rather than being restricted to her individual experience, her display of euphoria is capable of situating the collective struggles of the entire team for recognition and justice. Her posture, the act of ripping off the shirt, and her sense of agency and autonomy were liberating for many athletes who came after her. Before this episode, Chastain posed naked with only a football ball and the football boots on her feet for Gear Magazine in 1999. She was criticised for reinforcing the media's tendency to only feature players that conform to particular expectations around femininity and attractiveness (Heywood, 2006). Some saw the sexualisation of women's football as a betrayal of the game's benefits and meanings

to adults and young generations. Chastain appeared in several other magazines and is still considered a football icon and activist.

Mia Hamm's remarkable performance during the 1999 FIFA Women's World Cup ushered an unprecedented wave of media attention to women's football. However, her fame goes way beyond football. Aside from Mia's incredible journey in the US women's team, she has also advocated in favour of women's sports and is considered one of the greatest American sportswomen. In 1994, Hamm became Nike's first female football-sponsored athlete, helping to elevate the status of the women's team. In 1999, Nike's largest corporate building in Oregon was named after her. Hamm received endorsements from several companies, but the Gatorade (JayMJ23, 2009) campaign that pits Mia against Michael Jordan is perhaps the most remarkable. Powered by the sips of the sports beverage, Mia appeared strong, unstoppable and capable of challenging Jordan in various sports. Hamm's athletic versus feminine identity was repeatedly explored by sponsors, which shaped the public image of the football icon over the years.

For many, having more representation of female athletes in the media will help to create identification and positive associations with sports participation for young women. Some clubs invest in employing female footballers to work with the community outreach initiatives and other corporate social responsibilities to promote the women's game. Other strategies involve inviting female footballers to public events, making appearances, providing motivational speeches, participating in prize givings and other similar activities. In essence, the idea is to present female footballers as more approachable and relatable figures – in contrast with elite male footballers. Organisations that opt for this approach must continue to invest in creating a public profile for female players, identifying metaphors and stories that can neatly connect the athlete, the brand and the cause.

Athletes can create a solid emotional connection with fans (consumers). They can use this connection to promote causes, products and services effectively. However, it all depends on how these athletes are branded (represented). Emotional and behavioural responses from the public on the direction of inspiration for participation and search for sporting excellence are more likely to occur if the athlete's athletic competence is highlighted. Male athletes become sources of inspiration due to the media's apparent emphasis on male athletic performance. As such, inspiration is a by-product of the narrative around athletic feats, not a deliberate act. Those working towards inspiring the next generation of female players must continue to emphasise the challenges these athletes overcome to excel on the field. Several formats can be explored when trying to put their stories out to the general public – dedicated documentaries, biographies, reality shows, videogames, social media content, participation in interview programs, etc.



Figure 8. Marta, UN Women Goodwill Ambassador, meet Brazilian girls to discuss women's empowerment at Carnival



Source: [online image of Marta, UN Women Goodwill Ambassador, meeting Brazilian girls], (n. d.), <https://bit.ly/3f3tywK>.

With 17 goals in FIFA World Cup tournaments, the forward Brazilian player Marta (@martavsilva10) is the record holder for the most goals scored in the competition (for both women's and men's editions). Considered the best female football player of all time, Marta is a fierce defender of women's empowerment and has been serving as a United Nations Women ambassador since 2010. Figure 8 (above) shows Marta participating in a programme to empower young women working in the carnival industry in her home country, Brazil. Marta and many other female players occupy spaces to present football as a fun, attractive, and desirable game for the young generations and to advocate for gender equality in and out of sport.

The influence of female players falls way beyond the realms of sport, as they can relate to the struggles that many women might face when trying to create space in areas traditionally occupied or restricted to men in society. While it is critical to discuss the potential for female footballers to become positive role models for the youngest generations (Dunn, 2016), it is essential to challenge the expectation that players need to do something other than playing football to become inspirational. The reason is simple. Male players become sporting icons primarily because of their performance, competitiveness and success in the game, and this is considered sufficient to inspire the next generation of players. It should be the same with female players: their exceptional performances are more than enough to foster inspiration and admiration.

For more on this topic, **watch The problem with women's sports by Haley Rosen:**

Source: **TEDx Talks**. (2022). The problem with women's sports | Haley Rosen | TEDxBoston [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vG6P9gfgO6g>.

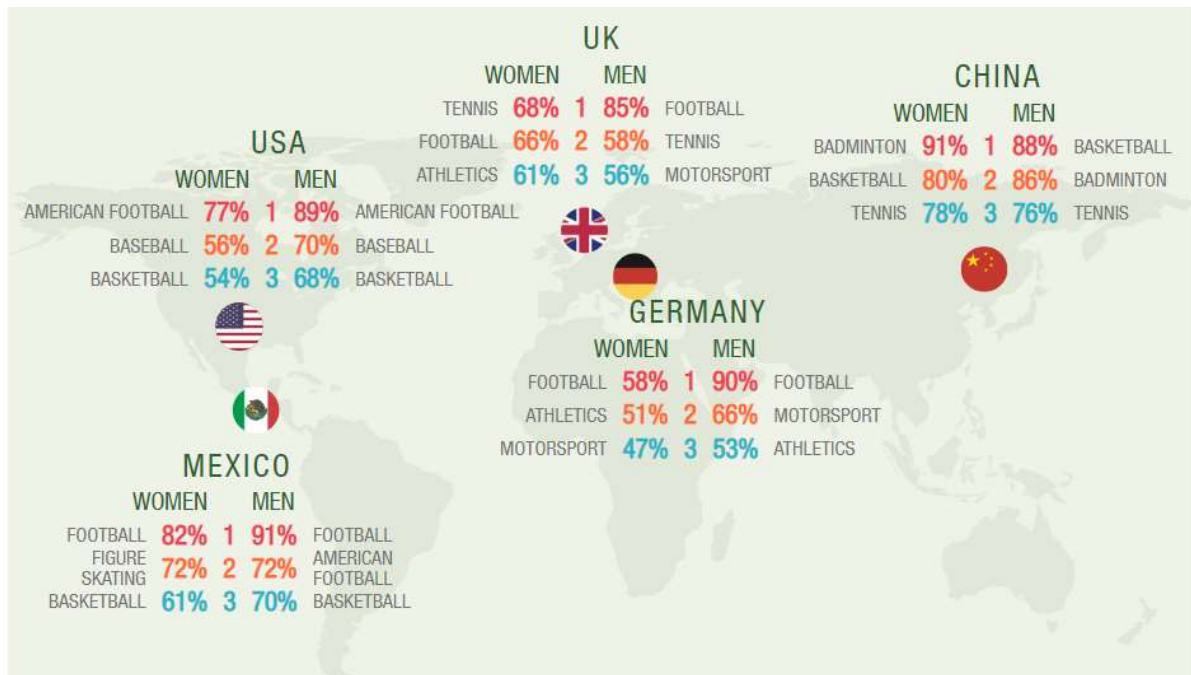
Creating conditions for the development of new icons

For Hargreaves (2000), there is a worldwide struggle to promote women's sports at all levels (from grassroots to elite participation). Instead of debating over what type of representation is appropriate, it is fundamental to recognise that both well-established, iconic athletes and any other women engaged in the sport can make valuable contributions to the promotion of women's football [see example here: Nike before that case study, n. d.]. Thus, every sports team or league seeking to gain fans sustainably, adopting a long-term approach, must consider the promotion of sports participation as the foundation for any other expansion strategy. This is because women who participate in sporting activities at school have a much greater interest in sport for the rest of their lives. Clubs and leagues also need to direct their communication strategies to women, as they possess significant resources (time, disposable income). Still, women currently spend significantly less on sports (from spectatorship to sports equipment) than men.

Even though people, on average, consume more men's sports than women's sports, there are several opportunities to balance out the consumption and elevate the status of women's sports. To understand these opportunities, consider the differences in consumption between countries (United States, Mexico, United Kingdom, Germany, and China) presented below in figure 9.



Figure 9. Percentage of men and women who sometimes or regularly watch specific sports on TV during their respective on-seasons



Source: Iberdrola, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3Bwt9ui>.

Except for the United States and China, football is among the three most watched sports in those other countries. Despite that, women watch significant less football than men (9 % less in Mexico, 16 % less in the United Kingdom and 32 % less in Germany). Because there is already a well-established interest in football, popularising women's teams and their respective athletes can dramatically improve the attractiveness of football for women and the appeal of women's football to men. According to Iberdrola (2022), equivalency in the interest in women's and men's sport is high in some countries such as Spain (41 %), Germany, Italy (44 %) Mexico (51 %). In the United Arab Emirates and China, for instance, at least 16 % of the population is exclusively interested in women's sport (What fans want, 2022).

The demand for more women's football is there, but supply-side issues make it challenging to create new space for future idols. One of the main reasons sports fans around the world do not follow women's football is the lack of media coverage for the women's game (What fans want, 2022). Only 10 % of the sport's coverage is dedicated to women's sports (Where are all the women?, 2018), and about 95 % of the output of American sports news coverage focuses on male athletes (Cooky *et al.*, 2021). Rights holders, broadcasters and media channels can address this deficit by working together to make women's sports and their stories accessible and visible, especially in emergent markets interested in women's football.

There are many exciting stories of female players to be told to a legion of fans of all ages. Because female athletes often have to overcome additional barriers in their quest for



excellence and improved performance, storytellers and video content creators can focus on inspirational and unique stories to celebrate these icons' lives and feats. To date, there is still very little material focusing on the trajectories of players from non-English-speaking countries, so this can be considered an opportunity to expand the representation of these athletes in other parts of the world.

Sponsors also play a big part in the development of new sporting icons. Without financial support, players cannot maximise their power and influence in and out of the field. Commercial sponsorships and endorsement contracts are significant sources of income for professional athletes, so players and agents are increasingly aware of the need to increase the focus on athletes' attributes and performances. When athletes sign valuable contracts with brands, they potentialise their capacity to become influencers, trendsetters and tastemakers, increasing their attractiveness and value for subsequent deals.

For brands, investments in athlete endorsement allow them to create a direct marketing promotion strategy with targeted groups. Brands need to identify sporting figures with outstanding characteristics and invest in maximising athletes' star status to improve the value of their deals. This point is critical in women's football, as sponsors still have the opportunity to firm endorsements deals at a relatively lower cost. Brands should ensure that the players' status is elevated and that the athletes receive increased interest from the media and the general public.

Sponsors can specifically focus on narratives that feature women footballers showing spectacular performances inside and outside the field. By focusing on the sublime moments of skills and the authenticity, commitment and effort to the sport, brands can make the most of the significant efforts of female athletes competing in a male-dominated sector.

Rather than trivialising their sporting feats, brands can elevate the perception of individual performances and contribute to the construction of charismatic star players. By doing so, brands will create a context where athletes can be authentic, vulnerable and speak for themselves. Without that, it is difficult for an athlete to stand out from the crowd and create differentiation (personal brand).

Brands can take the lead in advocating for collective causes involving equal pay, media coverage and other critical issues affecting women's sport. For instance, for the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup, Adidas announced that the company was committed to bridging the pay gap between women's and men's sports (figure 10). The company has also heavily invested in individual female athletes' endorsements, such as the \$8.5 million deal with the tennis player Naomi Osaka. For the 50th anniversary of Title IX with Billie Jean King and Candace Parker, Adidas selected 15 female US student-athletes for name, image and likeness (NIL) endorsement agreements with the company. Footballers Jaiden Thomas (@jaidenthomas12), Jameese Joseph (@jameesejoseph) and Maddy Anderson (@maddy.anderson.1) were part of this selective group. In addition, for the recent launch

of the Adidas Predator Edge, the top football boots of the company, the company featured female footballers at the forefront of the campaign.

Figure 10. Adidas announces an equal performance bonus payout for the US women's national team

We believe in inspiring and enabling the next generation of female athletes, creators and leaders through breaking barriers.

Today we are announcing that all adidas athletes on the winning 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup team will receive the same performance bonus payout as their male peers.

Eric Liedtke
*adidas Executive Board Member
and Head of Global Brands*



Source: [online image of Adidas announces an equal performance bonus], n. d., <https://bit.ly/3DJxJrY>

While Adidas has had an ever-present sponsor of FIFA tournaments, Nike dominates the world of athletics and basketball. It was not until 1996 that the company was able to close a sponsorship deal in football, supporting the Brazil men's national team. With women's football, the company could make a quicker move. In Europe, UEFA women's teams were only able to secure standalone sponsors a few years ago, in 2018.

By 2019, Nike signed an agreement to provide the match ball for all games and sponsored 12 of the 23 Lionesses (@lionesses) players and women's grassroots football organisations across the United Kingdom. Perhaps, the remarkable presence of Nike in women's football has been noticed way before that. When Brandi Chastain celebrated the winning goal in 1999, she revealed a black Nike sports bra she was wearing under her kit. Nike is addressing the gap in women's product sales, doubling the investments in women's products (Germano, 2022).

For the UEFA Women's Euro 2022, Nike features a remarkable campaign supporting female players from England's national team. Nike projected stars Demi Stokes (@demistokes), Lucy Bronze (@lucybronze), Keira Walsh (@keirawalsh), Georgia Stanway (@stanwaygeorgia), Lauren Hemp (@lauren_hemp) and the captain of the Lionesses, Leah Williamson (@leahwilliamson) across several landmarks including the Battersea Power Station, the London Bridge, the cliffs of Dover (figure 11).



Through endorsement agreements, players assume a series of responsibilities with a brand. The duties can extrapolate the use of their image in commercials, including expectations for their participation in advertising campaigns, attendance of product launches, endorsement of products and other activities that may have been agreed on the contract between the parties. Therefore, athletes must be aware of the effects (positive and negative) of increasing their visibility and exposure and seek support from sports agents during this stage. For some, this opportunity enhances the athlete's image and symbolic capital; however, increased visibility generates more pressure and expectations over athletes' performance. Those employed to support athletes' well-being need to be aware of the specific needs athletes might require as they navigate the requirements of new endorsement deals.

Nike created a campaign focusing on a narrative of success and empowerment of athletes and the team for the championship (figure 11). It is, in many ways, an excellent opportunity to make public manifestations of support and excitement for the team, and the initiative should inspire other companies to continue to focus on the athletic aspects of players' identity. Directing the attention of the fans and the media to the athletes and the tournament can create an atmosphere of support and celebration for athletes, the team and women's football.

Figure 11. Nike's ads across England celebrating Lionesses players



Source: [online image of Nike's ads across England celebrating Lionesses players], (n. d.), <https://bit.ly/3qQGPvt>.

Figure 12. Nike's ads across England celebrating Lionesses players



Source: [online image of Nike's ads across England celebrating Lionesses players], (n. d.), <https://bit.ly/3dvygmz>.

Figure 13. You've never seen England like this



Source: [online image of You've never seen England like this], (n. d.), <https://bit.ly/3Lt9Wyr>.

Athlete, celebrity and influencers: the future of endorsement

Companies can create a competitive advantage through athlete endorsement at every level, from elite to grassroots sports. Sponsors often offer money in exchange for sponsorship deals, but, in athlete endorsement, support can also come from providing specialised products and/or services (sponsorship-in-kind agreements). While sports apparel companies often approach athletes to provide sporting kits (equipment, footwear, accessories), service providers offer various options ranging from medical treatment to media management to specialised nutrition packages. It does not mean that endorsements are less valuable than sponsorship deals. Endorsements work as a two-way reputation-image exchange for the athlete and the sponsor. With endorsement deals, brands are connected to athletes in such a way that they can be showcased in a

more personalised way. Brands choose athlete endorsements to increase brand image, impact, recognition, credibility, and, of course, the bottom line.

On the other hand, players can often make more money with endorsement deals than their actual salary, especially when they can successfully partner with multiple major brands. Consider Megan Rapinoe ([@mrapinoe](#)), the fourth-best paid player in women's football, as an example. The team captain of the US women's team is a cultural icon, supporting equality and diversity efforts in society and standing fiercely against former US president Donald Trump. The Sports Illustrated's 2019 Sportsperson of the year (Megan Rapinoe is the 2019 SI Sportsperson of the Year, 2019) has endorsement deals with giants such as BodyArmor, Budweiser, Hulu, Nike, Procter & Gamble, Samsung, Victoria's Secret and VISA. Recently, with Nike, Rapinoe created Victory Redefined. In 2020, Rapinoe earned \$4.2 million, remaining outside the top 10 highest-paid female athletes' list. With Nike, she presented a capsule collection that includes exclusive footwear and apparel that highlights the causes and values she supports (see more [here](#): Victory Redefined, 2022). With this partnership, Rapinoe not only obtained financial benefits, but launched a new era of athlete advocacy that expects companies to align with the beliefs of sporting icons.

As sponsors and athletes continue exploring new opportunities to engage with customers, they will need to consider social and cultural changes catching the attention of young generations. Trans rights, racism, climate change and sustainability, gender equality, refugee crisis, and mental health are some topics to be considered. In this direction, new sporting icons can gain visibility as they speak out about these topics or simply because they represent women's football as a segment that embraces diverse voices and social justice causes.

The new faces of women's football

Asisat Oshoala ([@asisat_oshoala](#))

Mara Gomez ([@maragomez.official](#))

Delphine Cascarino
([@delphine_cascarino](#))

Nadia Nadim ([@nadi9nadim](#))

Nadiya Nighat ([@nadiyanighat](#))

Jaiyah Saelua ([@Jaiyahsaelua](#))

Paula Dapena ([@paulads14](#))

Kat Khosrowyar ([@kat.khosro](#))

Quinn ([@thequinny5](#))

Khalida Popal
([@khalida_popal_girlpower](#))

Samba" Bhandari
([@routineofnepalbanda](#))

Kumi Yokoyama ([@yoko10_official](#))

Yuki Nagasato ([@yuki_nagasato](#))

Social media is a vital revenue generator outside of salary for athletes because it acts as a platform to reach specific demographics and target audiences. Athletes can interact



with followers much more intimately, improving engagement metrics. The number of followers, likes and comments an athlete can gather is one of the main measurements of potential success sponsors can utilise to make strategic decisions. Ultimately, the idea is to create greater saturation of messages on social media. Athletes can improve their engagement metrics by presenting themselves as social influencers and persuasively introducing new topics and personal opinions to their followers. By doing so, athletes can stimulate third-party endorsement, with followers increasing the dissemination of original content by re-posting it on their own platforms. This is also considered an effective tool in the social media ecosystem.

New digital opportunities will need to be utilised to support the next generation of fans and football icons, new. Influencer marketing and athlete endorsement are very popular among millennials and Gen Z (table 1). Gen Alpha will likely continue to show a similar preference in this regard. As discussed in the previous modules, these generations grew up with the internet and cultivate an avid appetite for social media content. Unlike the other generations, these groups want to access information about their favourite celebrities with a few clicks. As such, any attempt to promote female players must consider the universe of digital interactions, spaces, and cultures.

Table 1. Top favourite celebrities for millennials and Gen Z

Gen Z (13-20)	Millennials (21-39)
1. Music artist	1. Music artist
2. Online celebrity	2. Actor
3. Actor	3. Online celebrity
4. Athlete	4. Athlete

Source: Ypulse Surveys, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3R4KX5S>.

There are endless opportunities for brands and athletes to explore the gaming world on platforms such as Metaverse and Roblox. In Metaverse, athletes and sponsors can feature incredible apparel for their digital avatars, just like they would do outside the digital world. MetaSoccer (Your Nex - Gen Football Club, n. d.) is already creating female avatars for the platform, opening up an excellent opportunity to take endorsements to the next level. On the other hand, Roblox allows users to interact with friends, artists, athletes, and celebrities. Nike has already got the grips with these new opportunities within the digital universe, and offers numerous opportunities for players to personalise avatars with Nike gear (see more here: Nikeland, n. d.). Soon enough, we should expect to have avatar of players endorsing in the context of gaming platforms, further expanding the horizons of interactivity in the digital space.

Endorsement arrangements have contributed to elevating female footballers' status to global icons. Athletes have been able to inspire, motivate, and surprise fans, and now they



have a much wider platform for self-expression and promotion. Undoubtedly, brands and athletes will continue to build on the excitement and emotion created by the uncertainty and spontaneity of sports and games. Athletes should continue to capitalise on their exceptional performances and explore their more comprehensive role as influencers and trendsetters in the digital space, reaching out to a broader audience. Companies that intend to invest in emerging sporting icons (e.g., non-English-speaking countries) or promote specific athletes and their respective agendas will need to continue investing in more unique endorsement packages. They need to not only rely on conventional campaigns and commercials, but dive into social media metrics to understand which athletes better communicate which message for whom.

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