The Footballer Woman: Literary and Cultural Representations a Century Apart

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Declaration

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Dedication

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The Footballer Woman: Literary and Cultural Representations a Century Apart

Siba Ewaiwi

Abstract

This dissertation explores the representation of female football protagonists in fictional works from two key periods: 1921 to 1923 and 2019 to 2022. The fictional texts are *Meg Foster–Footballer* (1921), *Captain Meg!* (1922), *Football Island* (1922), *Bess of Blacktown* (1922) by Don Gray, *Nell O' Newcastle* (1922) by Steve Nelson, *Ray of the Rovers* (1922) by C. Malcolm Hincks, *The Football Factory* (1923) by Don Gray, *Lily and the Rockets* (2019) by Rebecca Stevens, *Kicking off: Dick, Kerr Girls* (2020) by Eve Ainsworth, *Our Beautiful Game* (2021) by Lou Kuenzler, *Violet's War* (2021) by Rosemary J. Kind*, Vi for Victory* (2021) by Rosemary J. Kind, *All Together Now: Dick, Kerr Girls* (2022) by Eve Ainsworth, and *The Match: An Unsuitable Game* (2022) by Diana Townsend. The dissertation examines the major factors influencing the representation of the female football protagonist, including the historical and modern context of women's football in Britain, First World War Britain, and the developments of the feminist movement. The dissertation focuses on the impact of the 1921 FA ban on the production of fiction featuring the women's game. To bridge the two literary timeframes, and to explore works within the post-FA ban era, the research also considers the two films *Gregory's Girl* (1981) and *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002). While the research adopts an interdisciplinary approach where literary studies, history, queer studies, and film studies are used to inform the reading and analysis of the materials, the analysis heavily draws on theoretical approaches from sports feminism (sociology), exploring how issues such as gender stereotyping, visibility, and access to opportunity are negotiated, reinforced, or challenged through these narratives. Ultimately, this research demonstrates how fiction, both literary and visual, functions as a space to imagine and reimagine the past, while creating new avenues for visibility, empowerment, and inspiration in women's football. It argues that while narratives about female football protagonists are shaped by their socio-political contexts, they also play a powerful role in critiquing those contexts and challenging restrictive notions to do with the woman footballer.

Chapter One: Introduction - The Football Woman

1.1 Research Questions

This thesis explores patterns in fictional representations of women's football, focusing on two key timeframes of publication: the early 1920s (1921 to 1923) and much closer to the present day (2019 to 2022). Yet despite being published a century apart, all these fictions are set in the same historical moment, around the time of the First World War in Britain. They manifest the major transformations that the war brought to the roles that women played in industrialised society, and how women who worked also sought the opportunity to play. These fictions show the surge in popularity of the game for women at this time, and they also show the reaction against it, which manifested in real terms as the English Football Association's 1921 ban on women's football. The way in which this historical crisis continues to be a preoccupation of makers of fiction provides a continuing context for thinking about the women's game, even now the ban has been lifted for over fifty years. This provides the basis for the main research questions that this thesis explores: *how does fiction that features a female football protagonist from the historical origins of the game around World War One correspond with shifts in feminist discourse and perception? To what degree are such representations of the woman footballer "historical"? To what degree do they query or confirm conventions of hegemonic masculine authority?*

I aim to reveal how representations of female footballers have evolved, and examine what these portrayals suggest about gender, sport, and narrative over time. The thesis also considers how female football protagonists appear in other forms, such as visual representations, specifically film, between these two periods (1981 and 2002), to trace continuities and changes in their depiction across the century and offer a further dimension to my spectrum of comparison. My thesis seeks to show that there is insufficient attention given to the sheer range of representation that is available. Yet it is not an exhaustive taxonomy of

representations of the female footballer, but rather it shows the diversity of perspectives and methods that are evident in what might appear otherwise to be a limited group of fictions that all show more or less the same thing.

So rather than presenting a singular argument to answer the broader research question, this dissertation explores how the female football protagonist is specifically portrayed from fiction to fiction, across a range of formats (novels, serialised fictions in magazines or newspapers, as well as film). It uncovers and examines overlooked, neglected, or nearly forgotten fictional texts from the early twentieth century and considers how they have been imagined in twenty-first-century fiction, in a context where the women's game in Britain has now evolved significantly. At its core, this research is concerned with football not just as a sport, but as a space of possibility, freedom, and resistance that shapes the female protagonist's character as the story progresses. The First World War setting, common to many of these narratives, serves as a historical moment that enables change. It opens new opportunities for women to enter the workforce, which in turn creates the space, however limited, for them to play football. These factors influence how the female protagonist is represented as she is fighting for physical freedom and advocating for the right to play. The analysis, however, examines the forces working against this protagonist including institutional barriers, the dominant patriarchal mentality, and a society that questions her place in the game. These obstacles make the female footballer necessarily into a proponent of struggle and insists that their playing of the game is always more than a "leisure" activity.

The representations found in the 1920s fiction, specifically, *Nell O' Newcastle*, *Ray of the Rovers*, *Bess of Blacktown*, *Meg Foster—Footballer*, *Captain Meg!*, and *Football Island*, reveal that the withholding of opportunity to women is systematic, organised, and institutionalised. These female protagonists have to perform acts of radical interference to challenge the hegemonic influence of those institutions, through their individual and

collective actions to achieve reform. If they fail, the suppression of opportunity, involvement, and access would otherwise prevail. Yet not all of these fictions produced in the 1920s promote the same kind of action. 1923's *The Football Factory* proves that when institutions create spaces and grant access for women to be involved in sports while profiting from it, tolerance and acceptance become the norm. It is an apology for the redemptive qualities of capitalism, whereas the other fictions from the time are more familiarly oppositional and militant in their politics. Today's makers of young adult fiction differ again. When they write about the women of the 1920s, they do produce rebellious protagonists who voice the injustices they face, yet they do not have a radical tendency for change or action. Their football journey is impacted and controlled by gendered expectations that are monitored and policed within their household, factory and pitch. The emphasis shifts to questions of identity rather than explorations of the ability to effect change.

1.2 Significance of Study and Scope of Limitations

Fiction remains a space where we dare to imagine and reimagine a different reality, where texts bring life into histories that might have been forgotten, and invite different readings that could possibly bring different fields in conversation with one another. In this study, fields such as history, feminism, sociology, and sports studies are connected; the tools used to study women's football on the ground could be used in imaginative spaces to explore and examine the female footballer. A literary approach brings a unique perspective on the women's game not only because it stands as one of the earliest accounts to document the existence and presence of the game, but it translates the injustices, challenges, and historical barriers faced by female footballers into tangible stories that have the power to shape narratives and deconstruct them.

This dissertation contributes to the underexplored field of women's football fiction, addressing a notable gap in literary and sports studies. It draws attention to this genre's

potential not only as a narrative form but also as a vital contribution to understanding the history of the women's game and its mediation. Although some fictional accounts may contain historical inaccuracies, they nevertheless highlight the sport's re-emergence and rising popularity, institutional struggles, and the English FA ban on women's football. By applying a sports feminist lens to literary fiction and to films, this research proposes a new way of reading and categorising these texts, which could potentially lay the foundation for a distinct subgenre. It also demonstrates how disciplines like sport, literature, history, and gender and sexuality studies intersect within these texts. Therefore, the research may be used as a methodological guide for applying sports feminism's key principles in textual analysis, highlighting how narratives either reinforce or resist those values.

Films aside, this research mostly focuses specifically on British football prose fiction, with the setting limited to England (*Football Island* is the exception). It does not include an exhaustively transnational or global selection of texts. The analysis is also confined to two key time periods and excludes fiction published in the intervening years. This is mainly because those texts do not meet the study's criteria of having football as a central theme, a female character as the protagonist (rather than in a secondary or supporting role), and not aligning with the setting of WWI/Post WWI Britain. The remarkable concentration of fiction set in this period is what forms the main focus of the analysis and shows the appreciable range of interpretative and representational options that exist to the reader within that.

One of the more challenging aspects of producing this thesis was choosing what to include for analysis and what to leave out. I did not have time and space to engage with the figure of the female football fan, for example. The dissertation also leaves out theatrical work (drama for both stage and television) on the topic of women's football that features a female

football protagonist. [1] In addition, practical challenges also impacted the research, including the limited availability of academic material addressing both historical and more recent fictional works. Many of the primary sources, especially the texts from the 1920s, are only accessible through the archives of the British Library. Additionally, sport feminism remains an evolving field and heavily situated in the field of sociology; its applications for literary readings have not yet been fully established, and as such my efforts at performing this are by definition experimental.

1.3 The Primary Texts

The selection of texts was based on detecting a pattern of particular interest in the popular origins of the women's game. The first group of prose fictions were published in *The Football and Sports Library* over the span of three years from 1921-1923, and mostly after the FA ban had already been introduced. All narratives include a female protagonist involved in football in one way or another through playing the game, advocating for the right to play, fighting for visibility, or marketing the game. As if to counter the potential transgressiveness of these stories, most of the fictions are also framed by a conventional romantic plot in which the female protagonist ultimately falls in love with a male suitor and lives happily ever after. The second group of fictions from the present day (2019-2022) that revisit the 1920s, focused on a similar setting, had comparable storylines, and were published around the same time. There were discernible patterns in these distinct 'waves' of publication, each reflecting a shared literary focus on a particular period but discovering very different narrative strategies. The works of fiction in both groups are often hard to define and place in a specific

[1] A range of notable dramas for both theatre and television explore the theme of girls and women in football. Examples include *The Invincibles* (2023) by Amanda Whittington, *Atalanta Forever* (2021) by Amanda Whittington, and *Good for a Girl* (2025) by Becky Deeks, as well as the television series *Playing the Field* (1998–2002). Other TV series representing girls in football include *Jamie Johnson* (2016–2022) and *Jamie Johnson FC* (2023). The recent proliferation of such works reflects a growing engagement with the history and contemporary significance of women's football.

categorisation of fiction. For example, some are recognisable as stand-alone novels with a particular readership in mind, as with some of the young adult novels of 2021-22, but the earlier fictions under consideration were sometimes published serially, appearing in magazines rather than a book format, with a less clearly defined readership.

These magazine fictions featured in *The Football and Sports Library,* produced by the Amalgamated Press publishing house between 1921 and 1923, including *Meg Foster—Footballer* (1921), *Captain Meg!* (1922), *Football Island* (1922), *Nell O' Newcastle* (1922) by Steve Nelson; *Ray of the Rovers* (1922) by C. Malcolm Hincks; *Bess of Blacktown* (1922) and *The Football Factory* (1923) both by Don Gray. These works are hard to find, only available in the British Library archives, and would be lost had they not been first acquired by the British Museum Library. The selection of contemporary fictions that address the trials of female footballers in wartime and after includes *Lily and the Rockets* (2019) by Rebecca Stevens, *Our Beautiful Game* (2021) by Lou Kuenzler, *Violet's War* (2021) and *Vi for Victory* (2021) by Rosemary J. Kind, followed by *Kicking Off: Dick, Kerr Girls* and *All Together Now: Dick, Kerr Girls* (2022) by Eve Ainsworth, and *The Match: An Unsuitable Game* (2022) by Diana Townsend. The clustered publication of these fictions might in part be explained by the fact that one hundred years had elapsed since the ban, even though this is not directly referenced in all of the selected fictions.

In addition to these literary texts, this dissertation also examines two significant British films: *Gregory's Girl* (1981), set in a new town in Scotland and *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002), which centres on a woman's team in a middle-class suburb of London. These provided a vital reference point in terms of observing the re-emergence of woman's football after the lifting of the FA ban. *Gregory's Girl* shows the struggle of male authority, less than a decade after lifting the ban, to comprehend what it could no longer automatically disallow. Over twenty years on, *Bend It Like Beckham* shows to a degree how the game has become a

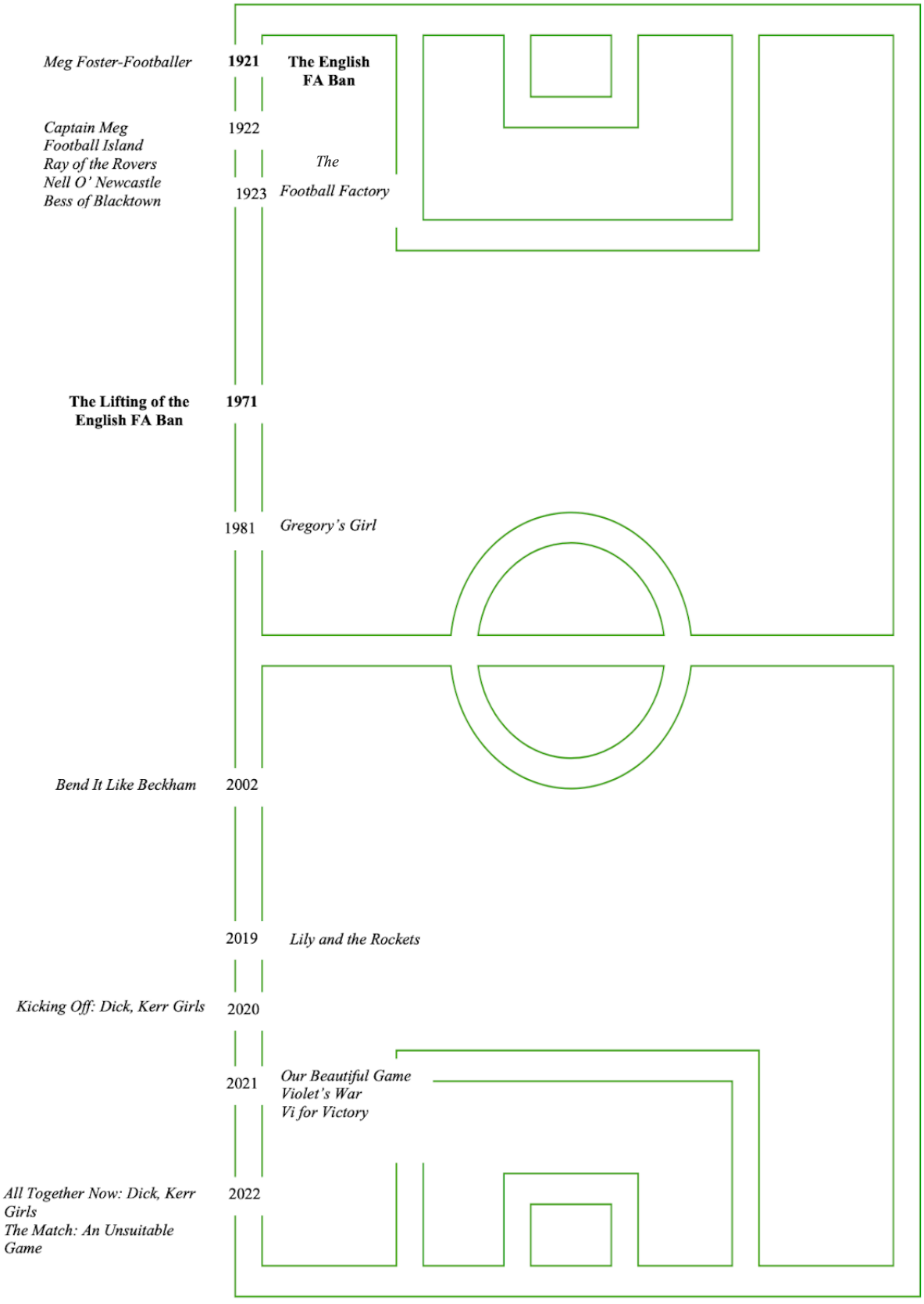
structured part of society, even if its players still have to struggle against misidentification and social prejudice. In this way, the films prepare the way for the reorientation of vision that comes with the twenty-first-century fictions that revisit the female footballing pioneers of the 1920s, de-emphasising the collectivity of what they achieved in favour of a more aspirationally individualistic heroism. The films share an interest in how the perception of the woman footballer is contested, and the medium of film is precisely where such a contest can be observed. Alongside the prose fictions, they present another wave of representation, and they are also significantly different in that they are representations of their own historical and cultural moment. *Gregory's Girl* illustrates an early stage in the development of contemporary women's football, focusing on an aspiring female player navigating a male-dominated environment where a dedicated women's game does not yet exist. Vitally, it acknowledges the return of women's football as part of a liberalising form in British society and therefore marks the end of the ban. *Bend It Like Beckham* suggests that, despite the increasing visibility and multicultural expansion of the women's game, male influence continues to frame and constrain the sporting experience in a new era in which football had apparently become a more individualistic phenomenon in the context of celebrity and consumerist culture.

1.4 Woman's Football and the Ban: A Timeline

Women's football in different parts of the world has been impacted by different restrictions and bans, such as those based on gender, religion, and sex. The main ban that this thesis is concerned with is the 1921 English Football Association ban implemented in England, and in Chapter Seven, the chapter sheds light on Scotland's ban on women's football when discussing the film *Gregory's Girl*. To give a sense of the scale of this thesis, and how it observes some remarkable concentrations of cultural activity both around the imposition of the FA ban and in the wake of its lifting, the following timeline maps the selected fiction in

reference to the English Football Association ban, 1921, and the lifting of the ban, 1971. The ban's main aim was to limit and suppress women's football. However, it was not absolute, in the sense that women's football did not disappear overnight. The ban, as Chapter Three establishes, did not end women's football, but it had a huge impact on how it continued to decline.

In the years preceding the official lifting of the ban, serious steps were taken to legitimise the game again, such as the establishment of the women's FA in 1969 and England's national team's participation in two unofficial world cups in 1970 and 1971. This dissertation does not investigate the effectiveness of the ban on the progression or decline of women's football per se, but the extent the literary scene was impacted by this ban. It acknowledges the ban as a major disruption to the women's game, intended to remove the female footballer from the collective consciousness and that also extended to her presence in other forms such as fiction. The dissertation looks into the impact of the 1921 FA ban on the presence/absence of women's football fiction. At the same time, it also manifests how the ban on women playing the game appears to have led to a less legally codified but nevertheless effective ban on writing about it, perhaps even imagining it. If this is a visual timeline of when the fiction appeared most, it also remarks on its imaginative decline, and implies a link to the institutional limitations on the game that had been imposed and allowed to take hold.


Meg Foster-Footballer
1921
The English FA Ban
Captain Meg
Football Island
Ray of the Rovers
Nell O' Newcastle
Bess of Blacktown
1922
The
1923
Football Factory
The Lifting of the English FA Ban
1971
1981
Gregory's Girl
Bend It Like Beckham
2002
2019
Lily and the Rockets
Kicking Off: Dick, Kerr Girls
2020
2021
Our Beautiful Game
Violet's War
Vi for Victory
All Together Now: Dick, Kerr Girls
The Match: An Unsuitable Game
2022

1.5 Use of Key Terms

A thesis about women's football, and how it has been administered and written about, will evidently be talking about 'sex' and 'gender', and will have to have a necessarily problematic sense of what these terms might signify. In "Sex and Gender in Sport Categorization: Aiming for Terminological Clarity," published in 2022, authors Irena Martínková, Taryn Knox, Lynley Anderson, and Jim Parry argue for greater distinction to be made between the terms 'sex' and 'gender' in the context of sports in order to help the sport community, and sport federations, in particular, to speak more appropriately and specifically about the categorisations that eligibility officials create. Martínková et al. trace the historical evolution of the terms 'sex' and 'gender', establishing that 'sex' "refers to biological aspects of the human body" (137) while 'gender' (prior to the 1950s), is "understood as an extension of biological identity: male/man/masculine and female/woman/feminine" (136–137). The most recent distinction between the two, according to the same article, which is termed as a "contemporary conventional" distinction, "entails no change to the definition of sex"; however, gender "refers to one's sense of self as man or woman, or as gender-neutral or gender-fluid (amongst other possibilities)" (136). Martínková et al. acknowledge the changing nature of how the terms 'sex' and 'gender' have been understood and discuss how 'gender' has become more popular in usage in some contexts today, such as in discussions about economic equality, within which the term "gender pay gap" is more common than the term "sex pay gap". They are most concerned, however, with how conflation between the two terms in the context of sport has resulted in sports organisations and sports researchers talking in "gender terms when they mean sex" or using "the sex and gender vocabularies interchangeably" (134). They argue that in certain contexts such as sport or medicine, it is "vital to distinguish between sex and gender, so that we know what we are talking about" (134). Greater terminological clarity concerning 'sex' and 'gender' in sport, Martínková et al.

argue, would allow for greater consistency among sporting organisations and, vitally, for the categories within which athletes compete to operate more fairly. This would, as Martínková et al., say, result in such categories "allow[ing] athletes of all different types of bodies to compete fairly and to achieve victory" (144).

When it comes to the use of terms in the context of literary studies, conceptions of 'sex' and 'gender' are continually challenged and rendered more fluid. With particular reference to the fictional representation of the woman footballer, their choice firstly to play football represents a kind of transgression and rebuke to gendered expectations, primarily against the complacent idea that football is a male sport. Secondly, and with particular emphasis in twenty-first-century fiction, lesbian and tomboy characters appear, indicating that women's football is a home to sexual diversity, and that "traditional models of sex" and 'gender' are inadequate to understanding it. In many respects, women's football is a remarkably tolerant and diverse environment, not least when compared to the repressions of the male game.

As a central element in the protagonists' lives, football also destabilises the rigid association of female/feminine with passivity and domesticity. The perception of the sport as male/masculine, generates conflict and tension as the women footballers are punished for failing to conform to socially enforced categories of female/feminine. Alongside this, the emergence of sexuality as a theme further necessitates a distinction between 'sex' and 'gender'. According to "traditional" understandings of 'gender' and 'sex', women are expected to demonstrate their womanhood by marrying and reproducing, thereby fulfilling a reproductive role. The majority of the fiction from the 1920s subscribes to this, containing its potential for transgression within a marriage plot (it should also be noted that the writers of that fiction were all male). The appearance of lesbian characters in relationships in the twenty-first-century fictions disrupt these expectations and expediencies of plot, as their

identities clash with the presumption of heterosexual relations. In doing so, gender shifts from being interchangeable with 'sex' to signifying "identity and social roles within society" (137).

The dissertation primarily examines representations of female players in fictional accounts, and it focuses on their life journeys and experiences in and beyond football. In the selected novels, the protagonists' biological sex is acknowledged as female and it is not questioned, rejected, or problematised. Rather, it serves as a narrative backdrop, not a central theme of discussion. In relation to 'genders' and 'sexualities', this dissertation posits 'genders' as socially constructed roles, expectations, behaviours, and identities traditionally associated with being female or male. It treats 'sexualities', as mentioned before, as a range of sexual orientations, desires, and preferences. So as 'sex' generally refers to biological characteristics of an individual, 'gender' addresses social and cultural factors that derive from the biological, reproductive characteristics of sex. In other words, 'gender' is an expression of gender norms. Therefore, the analysis of the female players in fictional accounts focuses on the construction and development of the female footballer protagonist, examining how she encounters and navigates challenges that highlight her societal role as a woman. These challenges often involve negotiating expectations tied to femininity and heterosexuality, and at times, her nonconformity to these norms and expectations provokes discomfort within society.

Scholars have varied notably in how they refer to the female footballer in the fictions of the 1920s. Alethea Melling, in her comprehensive analysis of 1920s fiction titled "Ray of the Rovers': The Working-Class Heroine in Popular Football Fiction, 1915–25" (1998), uses the terms "Ladies football"(97) and "football heroine"(101) The historian Jean Williams, in *A Game for Rough Girls? A History of Women's Football in Britain* (2003), refers to the fictional accounts of the early 1920s as "early fictional accounts of women playing football"

(78). She also references Melling's use of the term "heroine" when discussing the main female character (78). Similarly, historian Tim Tate in *Girls With Balls: The Secret History of Women's Football* (2013) uses terms such as "female sporting role models," "young women," "girls," "female footballer," and "women footballers" (153–54). Lee McGowan, who has extensively worked on mapping the genre of football fiction, especially in his 2019 book *Football in Fiction*, uses expressions like "women female footballers," (18) "female teams," (20) and "female footballers" (18). The range of terminology employed by McGowan speaks to how the language that we use to describe women's participation in football is in itself problematic. It is also an example of the kind of terminological confusion sometimes found in sports research, as pointed out by Martínková et al. The variety indicated in how researchers have referred to women footballers might suggest a picture of confusion surrounding what she actually is, what she should be called, and which also betrays conceptions of what she should be.

In terms of how language can restrain women and girls, Jean Williams points out that "sport … is a peculiar business and we make exceptions for it that we do not accept in other areas of our lives" (Williams, "Football and Feminism" 181). The suggestion here is that compared to in education or the workplace where women and girls are freer to transgress restrictive expectations that would see them adhere to gender norms or roles based on their sex, in sport women are more subject to a sort of biological determinism bound up with how language frames them as athletes. As Williams says, "[f]or female football players today, biology is indeed destiny" (181):

> Like much sport, the language we use to describe female participation is in itself problematic. 'Football' usually means the game as played by men and boys: 'women's football' is, observers insist is a different variant. 'The women's game' and other descriptors therefore express gender difference in ways that are both symbolic and embodied (181).

While I acknowledge the complexities and problematics surrounding language and terminology when discussing women's football and the female footballer, at the same time, this dissertation does not extensively engage with semantic analysis or the historical development of terminology. I instead seek to focus on the experiences of the novels' central characters and how their narration connects to readers and try to use definitions and terms that are not so contested. Therefore, the most common term used throughout the dissertation to refer to the main protagonist in each novel would be 'female' as an inclusive term relevant to all age groups of the protagonists. However, there will be some differentiation in places between "women's football" and "girls' football", depending upon the age profile of the players or how the fiction-maker chooses to represent them. On rare occasions, there will be reference to the sport as "ladies' football", and its "lady footballer," which was one of the earliest ways to refer to the sport before women's football became the most common, and when the game might have had a different profile in terms of the class profile of its participants. According to the *Encyclopaedia of British Football* (2020), "[T]he term 'ladies' football', with its connotation of a certain gentility and restraint, remained the preferred label for the game until the 1980s when, in a very different cultural climate, 'women's football' became the norm" (Russell et al. 325). Basically, throughout the dissertation, a range of names and designations are used, and these are understood as part of the historical and cultural responsiveness of the game, something reflected in the language that emerged around it.

1.6 Reading the Fiction

As the fiction studied here comes from two periods of publications nearly a century apart, it clearly reflects shifts in the representations of women. In 1920s Britain, a society recovering from World War I and experiencing the impact of the first wave of feminism saw significant changes, such as women gaining the right to vote and an expanded set of legal rights. This

saw writers produce women protagonists who were acutely aware of the charged social atmosphere. These protagonists embody the tensions of their time, navigating between traditional expectations and emerging demands for greater freedom. So, although writers frequently presented a protagonist striving for liberation, their narratives often have a romantic subplot, typically centring on a heterosexual protagonist who finds love. While these texts suggest that some freedoms may be granted, they also suggest that certain relationships, particularly romantic and domestic ones, should remain conventional and socially regulated arguably as a way of preserving social order and avoiding controversy.

On the other hand, the most recent publications and the films reflect a different trend. These contemporary narratives are arguably shaped by the influence of the following waves of feminism where the demands are varied and extend beyond legal rights. As a result, some protagonists in contemporary fiction represent a broader spectrum of identities. For example, non-heterosexual relationships are not only depicted but, in some cases, normalised within the narrative. This shift signals a move away from rigid expectations of conformity and heterosexuality. The representation of a broader spectrum of identities and relationships, including potentially gender-queer identities and non-heterosexual relationships, reflects a more liberal Britain – or, perhaps, seeks to imagine one. It also reflects developments in feminist thought and activism which became less concerned with suffrage and more concerned with freedoms to do with sexual orientation and the expression of gender identity during the periods within which these texts were published and produced.

Despite the evolution of texts and themes, one thing remains constant: the female presence on the field is contested in the majority of the texts. The different portrayals of the protagonists showcase the tensions surrounding women's place on the pitch: their attempts to negotiate, their need to choose when to rebel, whether to disobey or give in. All of this resonates with the broad demands of sports feminism for women to have access to the sport

and the opportunity to play, from which by extension they gain a form of physical freedom. The fictional accounts cannot be viewed separately from their historical contexts or from the demands of successive waves of feminism, which have sought to expand freedoms over time, even if not always in an inclusive way. These texts therefore utilise young women protagonists as catalysts for change. They are certainly meant to inspire readers, at least to build empathy towards female footballers and what they have had to endure and engineer over time. Their very existence on the field today could be seen as a marker of historical struggle. The story of women's football is very much a political story. The authors in this thesis politicise their female protagonists but do not victimise them, casting them as symbols of defiance in a male-dominated society and sport.

1.7 Readership

The choice of texts regarded as football fiction in this dissertation is primarily guided by Lee McGowan's definition of the genre. In *Football in Fiction*, McGowan defines football fiction as follows: "[it] significantly relies on football as a central, pivotal or substantive element; this can and should include more than one of the following: narrative structure; narrative situation; point of view; voice; language use; setting; and character development" (5). This definition applies to all of the texts examined here but whereas McGowan primarily examines football fiction with male footballers, I examine football fiction with female footballers.

The broad genre under consideration is football fiction, which includes both adult fiction and young adult fiction. Each category includes fictional narratives aimed mostly at specific readerships: adult male readers, adult female readers, young adult male readers, and young adult female readers. This dissertation focuses on adult football fiction from the 1920s that appears to be targeted at a female readership (at least to a degree, as the magazines they were published in also contained stories about male footballers) and young adult football fiction from the 21st century more clearly intended for a young adult female audience. It also

looks at some fictions from the latter period which might be defined as fiction for adults. These categorisations are based on assumptions about sex, age, and gendered experiences particularly those shaped by involvement in women's football, either as players or in related roles. While this is not to suggest that readers of other genders or age groups would not be interested in these narratives, but for the purposes of classification, they are grouped according to these two readership categories.

The assumed readership aligns closely with the ages and experiences of the protagonists. In the fiction from the 1920s, five female protagonists are featured. The ages of two are explicitly stated: Meg Foster is 18, and Rose Mallory is 19. As the other protagonists share similar experiences and life circumstances, it is plausible to suggest they are of a comparable age. In contrast, the young adult fiction published between 2019 and 2022 presents protagonists aged between 12 and 15, reflecting a clear focus on a younger readership. The group of adult fiction from the twenty-first century features protagonists aged 18 and 23, again corresponding to an adult female audience.

Lee McGowan draws a clear parallel between the growing interest in women's football and its literary potential: "As public awareness, acceptance and interest in the women's game grows, so does publication of novels with a female footballer as protagonist" (McGowan, *Football in Fiction* 118). McGowan's *Football in Fiction* was published in 2019, the year that marks the beginning of a significant surge in publications featuring a female football protagonist. I will demonstrate that the rise in publications on the history of women's football in Britain marked the expansion of the genre of women's football fiction. It also promulgated the emergence of sub-categories such as historical adult women's football fiction and historical young adult women's football fiction, giving further historical fibre to the imagination of the game. McGowan's conceptual mapping of the field can therefore be

expanded upon to reflect how research into the history of the women's game has played a role in enabling and inspiring the growth of fictional representations.

1.8 Chapter Overview

Chapter Two: Theoretical and Methodological Framework

This chapter presents the different methodological approaches used in this dissertation including archival work, contextualisation, textual analysis, and close reading, across disciplines (literary studies, history, sports feminism (sociology), queer studies, and film studies). The chapter states the limitations of existing literary theories used to analyse texts featuring a female footballer protagonist, contextualises the female footballer within the wider historical context, and highlights the main theoretical approaches used to inform the analysis of the female football protagonist. It shows how the progression of sports feminism goes hand in hand with the evolving representations in the selected texts and films. It includes the foundational work of Jennifer Hargreaves in addition to Heidi Eng and Heather Skyes' understanding of 'queer' in sports. The chapter highlights Aarti Ratna's research, which focuses on the limited work done on the barriers in women's sports that go beyond gender and sexuality to include ethnicity and race. It also establishes the Foucauldian lens used to identify the power dynamics evident across the fictional texts, and how film studies mainly Laura Mulvey's male gaze is utilised in the analysis alongside John Berger's insights. Jayne Caudwell's work threads throughout as a source of contextualising the wider view of women's football in the UK.

Chapter Three: The Context

The chapter begins with a historical exploration of the progression of women's football in Britain, focusing on a pivotal moment in its history: the 1921 English Football Association ban. This ban serves as a significant historical marker that both reflected and reinforced the societal limitations imposed on women at the time. Through a detailed examination of the

history of women's football from this critical point to the present day, the chapter examines how women's football has evolved in the face of ongoing challenges to become a symbol of resilience and progress in male-dominant sports. The chapter aims to trace the incremental improvements in the sport, such as increased visibility, enhanced funding and expanded professional opportunities, which have collectively transformed women's football into a significant cultural and global phenomenon. Therefore, the first part of the chapter seeks to contextualise the past and current state of women's football within the overlapping discourses of feminism, sports, and academia. Through this approach, the chapter sets a foundation for understanding the context of women's football that shapes the experiences of the female football protagonists that is at the core of this dissertation. The fictional narratives from the past (1921-1923) and the present (2019-2022) that will be explored further in Chapter Five and Six are steeped in historical contexts, such as the impacts of World War I and the evolution of the feminist movement, offering profound insights into the personal and collective experiences of female athletes.

Chapter Four: The Fiction

This chapter begins with a general overview of the origins of football fiction as a literary category, outlining its emergence, defining traits, and place within British popular fiction. From there, the discussion moves to women's football within the taxonomy of football fiction, examining how stories featuring female footballers have been positioned or often overlooked within the broader framework of football literature. The section that follows explores the cultural and publishing shifts that contributed to this type of fiction's decline, particularly following the 1921 English FA ban on the women's game. The chapter then turns to examining the re-emergence of fiction featuring a female protagonist. This resurgence, especially visible in women's football in young adult fiction, shows how recent stories respond to changes in today's society while also looking back with a sense of longing for the

early days of women's football. In the chapter, summaries of all the prose fiction discussed from both the early 1920s and the 2019 to 2022 period are provided to give a clear understanding of the key texts, their plots, and their central themes. Finally, the chapter engages with the question of whether historical fiction necessarily has to be a matter of accuracy, considering whether changes to historical facts weaken or strengthen these stories, especially concerning their potential to educate, inspire, or connect with readers. The chapter highlights how writing fiction, that in effect, seeks to re-imagine the life of a historical figure might generate ethical problems about which the reader arguably should be made aware.

Chapter Five: The Protagonist in Prose Fiction 1921-1923

Building on the historical context of women's football established in Chapter Three, this chapter explores how female footballers have been represented in British fiction during the early 1920s. The chapter focuses on fictional works published between 1921 and 1923, including *Bess of Blacktown* (1922), *Nell O' Newcastle*, *Meg Foster-Footballer* (1921), *Captain Meg!* (1922), *Football Island* (1923), *Ray of the Rovers* (1922), and *The Football Factory* (1923). Through the lens of sports feminism, the analysis examines the protagonists Nell Harmer, Bessie Booth, Meg Foster, Ray Lester, and Rose Mallory, considering their portrayals not only as footballers but also as workers navigating the social and institutional barriers of their time. These characters collectively present determined and empowering figures, with football functioning as a political tool that symbolises resistance and progress.

Chapter Six: The Protagonist in Prose Fiction 2019-2022

This chapter turns to contemporary novels published between 2019 and 2022. The novels could be categorised into two groups depending on the readership. The first group targets young adult readers, and includes *Lily and the Rockets* (2019), *Our Beautiful Game* (2021), *Kicking Off: Dick, Kerr Girls* (2021), and *All Together Now: Dick, Kerr Girls* (2022). The texts reflect contemporary feminist concerns and more inclusive perspectives. By applying

sports feminism and queer theory, mainly Heidi Eng to my reading of these texts, this part of the dissertation explores how these novels respond to current challenges facing women in sport, including LGBTQ+ experiences. Therefore, the span of nearly a hundred years between the two groups of fiction proves to bring with it a shift in the portrayal of the female protagonist. The second group of fiction targets an older readership and includes the novels: *The Match: An Unsuitable Game* (2022), *Violet's War* and *Vi for Victory* (both 2021). Through the main protagonists, the fictions expose the horrors of WWI Britain and the shortcomings of the government's handling of the war. The protagonists utilise their talent as football players to raise funds to help with the war efforts. In addition, this chapter argues that the protagonists in this wave of publications, unlike their historical counterparts, often express agency through quieter, less confrontational means.

Chapter Seven: The Protagonist in Film (1981 and 2002)

This part of the dissertation shifts from text to picture as another form of fictional representation. It explores two significant films that bridge that gap between the two groups of fiction covered in Chapter Five and Chapter Six. The two British sport films are *Gregory's Girl* (1981) and *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002). The focus of the analysis, similar to the previous chapters, is centred around the main female character in each film and how she is featured as a football player. The analysis of the representations also continues to build on the overarching research question which asks how has the female football protagonist been conceived at different points in history? The chapter argues that while the historical gap between the films and the fiction discussed in earlier chapters demonstrates some progress in the portrayal of female football protagonists, their representation remains constrained by the enduring influence of the male gaze and persistent prejudices surrounding women in sports and their sexuality.

I aim to show how the two films highlight the different aspects that control the representation of women in the British sports film industry through understanding the impact of the male gaze (and the possibility of disrupting it), as well as diversity in representation, and how sexuality becomes visible and present in the films. I analyse both films through sports feminism and feminist film theory. The work of both Laura Mulvey and John Berger are consulted to understand the function of the 'male gaze' in the films. In addition, when analysing gender issues in the films, especially in terms of discussing stereotypes, sexuality and homophobia, Jayne Caudwell and Jennifer Hargreaves' approaches to gender and sports feminism are utilised. Additionally, when discussing barriers and issues in football, gender, and ethnicity, the work of Aarti Ratna is consulted.

Chapter Eight: The Conclusion

The conclusion provides a recap of how the female football protagonist has evolved over time. It states how the portrayal of these young women has changed in response to historical events, such as the 1921 ban on women's football and the lifting of it. The conclusion also reminds the reader of the evolving theoretical framework of sport feminism and how it has shaped the interpretation of the female football protagonist. The conclusion emphasises that the female protagonist is not a single entity but rather a dynamic figure who has adapted and changed with the evolving culture and state of the women's game.

1.10 Contextual Considerations

An ongoing theme of this research has been how the reality of women's football has often seemed to outpace fiction in terms of providing significant spectacle. As with the final of the 2023 Women's World Cup on 20 August 2023, when Luis Rubiales, then the president of the Spanish Football Association, kissed the Spanish forward Jenni Hermoso full on the lips as if it was his right. But there was a before, and then there was an after, to this kiss. Prior to the 2023 World Cup, fifteen players from the Spanish national team sent letters to the Royal

Spanish Football Federation (RFEF), expressing their concerns about Jorge Vilda's coaching, the emotional toll it was taking on them, and the negative impact on their well-being. As a form of protest against these conditions, they refused to play for the national team. The federation sided with Jorge Vilda and demanded that the players apologise (Crabill 224).

FIFA President Gianni Infantino failed to intervene to prevent the harm that was caused to the team or to properly resolve the matter. He placed the burden on women, urging them to "convince us men" ("'Pick the Right Battles': Gianni Infantino Puts Onus on Women to Get Equal Pay") rather than simply fulfilling his duties to ensure safer and more equitable conditions for women in football. By ignoring the cries of the players of the Spanish national team and not intervening to resolve the issues, Rubiales acquired more and more power. It took an international scandal, one which played out in full view of an audience of millions, for Luis Rubiales to grasp something as basic as the fact that kissing a player without her consent is unacceptable. The kiss was later ruled as a non-consensual kiss in a 2025 court ruling, and Luis Rubiales was eventually sacked and subsequently found guilty of sexual assault (Gooch). If you ask anyone about that match, they would probably not be able to recall the score or the player, Olga Carmona, whose goal brought the cup home for Spain for the first time in the history of the women's game, but they would very much have the kiss image imprinted in their memory. This unveils the fragility of the existence of women's football in the consciousness of the spectator. This kiss took the spotlight away from a FIFA World Cup final, a historic moment for the Spanish team. It is a very necessary reminder of what all the women represented in this thesis have had to contend with.

The women's game started and grew differently from the men's game, as did the debates surrounding it and the stories told about it. This dissertation is not primarily concerned with how the women's game differs from the men's, and yet it cannot be ignored that the women's game is perceived in the shadow of the men's game. It is not separate, but

also not a direct competitor. Negative focus often centres on its financial potential, with the claim that the women's game does not generate the same profit as the men's game. While this is true, such a conclusion cannot be reached without first understanding the reasons behind it. More importantly, money and profit are not a real measure of popularity. Another common argument is the supposed lack of excitement in the women's game, which is a highly subjective view. What truly distinguishes the women's game, when viewed through a historical perspective, are the repeated bans and systemic restrictions imposed on it which contributed to its unstable and fragile progression.

In the United Kingdom, particularly England, the home of modern football, there is a long history of denying the women's game the right to exist alongside the men's game. The first ban to hit women's football was on the 5th of December 1921 when the English Football Association, the governing body of football in England, announced that "the game of football is quite unsuitable for females and ought not to be encouraged" (*Football Association Minute Book, 1920–1923*). The ban was imposed at a peak moment for women's football in England, and the ban, only lifted in 1971, was a setback not only for the sport but for women's rights in general.

In 2025, the English Football Association, specifically from June 1st, 2025, onwards, announced that "Transgender women will no longer be able to play in women's football in England" ("Statement: Supreme Court Ruling: An FA Update Following the Recent Supreme Court Transgender Ruling"). According to FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association/ International Federation of Association Football), the highest governing body in football, "FIFA Competitions are separated for men and women [...] For FIFA men's competitions, only men are eligible to play. For FIFA women's competitions, only women are eligible to play" (*Regulations FIFA Gender Verification* 4,7). It is important to note here

that debates around this ban are ongoing as this move from the English FA is seen to some as fair and for others as an act of exclusion.

Although the English FA ban on trans women is on a national level, it is under the administrative umbrella of FIFA. Under the presidency of Gianni Infantino, that organization has publicly aligned with figures that have no reservations when it comes to sensationalising the role of trans women in sports. This was affirmed by the image of Gianni Infantino in Donald Trump's White House, standing with members of the Juventus team that was participating in the 2025 FIFA Club World Club in the USA. Infantino smiled indulgently as Trump went on to ask the members of the Italian club, "Could women make your team, fellas?" before turning to the manager who answers, "We have a very good women's team." [2] to which Trump replied "But they should be playing with women, right? You know, one of those things," going on to describe the manager's answer as "very diplomatic" (Guardian Sport).

Although this dissertation is not about trans players specifically, it seeks to highlight broader injustices in sport, and how they might need a new diplomacy to communicate them. Resorting to the exclusion of certain groups is often the easier option, but instead, there should be policies and regulations designed to accommodate those who do not conform to traditional classifications. The 1921 English FA's ban on women's football was based on the notion that it failed to meet early 20th-century standards of femininity, with the game being described as "unladylike" and dangerous. This ban not only denied women access and opportunity but also excluded them from decision-making in sport and control over their own bodies. It also erased them from sporting history, and without the telling and retelling of that history, we cannot fully understand the delayed and limited progress in the women's game.

[2] Juventus women's team are the Serie A 2024/2025 season winners

This dissertation aims to bring this history to light by uncovering early fictional accounts (1921-1923) that depict a historical moment marked by both the rise and subsequent suppression of women's football. It seeks to place contemporary texts (2019-2022) that occupy a similar imaginative and historical space in dialogue with these earlier fictions and the ongoing struggles they reflect. At the same time, the dissertation explores how cinematic portrayals (1981 and 2002) of women's football have evolved, often moving away from or overlooking the World War I historical context and turns to the post FA ban on women's football. Through the fictional and cultural representations, the research aims to unpack and understand the simplest and the most complex issues that face female players at different points in time. The state of women's football is inseparable from the impact history had and still has on it.

Chapter 2: Theoretical and Methodological Framework

The dissertation is primarily situated within the discipline of English literature, it uses close reading and textual analysis of fourteen fictional texts and two films, examining the aesthetic representation of the female football protagonist in each work across different historical periods. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines representation as "a depiction or portrayal of a person or thing" ("*Representation*"). In the context of this dissertation, representation examines how fictional texts and films portray female football protagonists across changing settings, as they confront and overcome challenges between the past and present. It also raises broader political and social questions about how women's football is represented and who has the authority to represent it. The selected fictional texts are categorised as sports fiction more specifically, football fiction. The dissertation, as stated in Chapter One, adopts Lee McGowan's definition of football fiction in categorising the selected texts.[3] In addition to McGowan's definition, the selection criteria required that the selected works of fiction feature a female footballer as the main character allowing the analysis to focus specifically on the representation of female footballers. To analyse the primary material, the research adopts an interdisciplinary approach where literary studies, history, sports feminism (sociology), queer studies, and film studies are used to inform the analysis and close reading of the materials.

Beginning with literary studies, there is no specific literary theory designed to analyse texts that focus exclusively on female characters within sporting contexts. While feminism provides a broad and applicable critical framework, this research draws on sports feminism, a field primarily developed within sociology, to propose a more tailored analytical approach to

[3] According to Lee McGowan, football fiction is a text that: "significantly relies on football as a central, pivotal or substantive element; this can and should include more than one of the following: narrative structure; narrative situation; point of view; voice; language use; setting; and character development" (McGowan, Football in Fiction 5).

literary representations of female characters within sporting contexts. The primary material for this thesis consists of works from twentieth-and twenty-first-century Britain, with particular focus on England. To locate and access early twentieth-century fiction relevant to the topic, archival research was conducted at the British Library in London. Two research visits were undertaken: the first during the early stages of the project in November 2021, and the second in February 2025 to complete the archival work. As a result, seven fictional texts were identified for analysis including: *Meg Foster – Footballer* (1921), *Captain Meg!* (1922), *Football Island* (1922), *Bess of Blacktown* by Don Gray (1922), *Nell O' Newcastle* by Steve Nelson (1922), *Ray of the Rovers* by C. Malcolm Hincks (1922), and *The Football Factory* by Don Gray (1923).

In Chapter Three I contextualise the selected body of work, where I situate it within the broader historical context of the twentieth century, with particular attention to two key historical moments that shaped the experiences of female football protagonists in Britain: The First World War and the ban imposed by the English Football Association in 1921. The history is informed mainly by the research of Jean Williams, Carrie Dunn, Tim Tate, Suzanne Wrack, and Steve Bolton where their research collectively unpacks the important role history plays in putting the demands of women in sport into perspective. Chapter Three also contextualises women in sports within the academic landscape, the broader efforts of sports feminism and its various approaches (liberal, radical, Marxist feminism, etc.) and presents current issues in the female athletic experience. Adopting a contextual approach, grounds the analysis of the female football protagonist within the mentioned broader context.

In Chapter Five, the close reading of the seven fictional texts from the early 1920s builds on the foundational and comprehensive research done by Alethea Melling on the fiction from 1921-1923 particularly, "'Ray of the Rovers': The Working-class Heroine in Popular Football Fiction, 1915–25" while extending it to the application of sports feminism

as a lens for textual interpretation. Her paper explores the various representations of female heroines in early 20th-century football stories, examining themes such as empowerment, class, gender, femininity, patriarchy, power, and sport, while also considering the context of post-war Britain and the broader historical, cultural, political, and ideological climate. My reading of the texts is framed within the theoretical framework of sports feminism where the dissertation draws on Jennifer Hargreaves' conceptualisation of sports feminism. Although contemporary debates have developed considerably since her work was first published, it remains an important point of reference. Her early work such as *Sporting Females: Critical Issues in the History and Sociology of Women's Sports*, offers a valuable conceptual framework that provided the foundation for later theoretical developments.

In this study, sports feminists are understood as "[…] both men and women who want discrimination in sports on account of gender to be eradicated. It is a desire for change" (41). This notion resonates strongly with the central restrictions and challenges faced by the protagonists who refuse to give in and learn how to navigate in/visible bans. The analysis of the protagonists draws directly on the historical treatment of women in sports, which provides an important context and highlights how, despite their fictional nature, align with Jennifer Hargreaves's observation that,

> [The] history of women's sports can provide an understanding of the origins and causes of women's subordination in sports, and of the nature of resistance to change and struggles for change. A historical perspective is essential to understand how residual forms of sport for women coexist with dominant and emergent ones (53).

The analysis of the chapter indicates the fiction featuring a female football player from the past and present cannot be read separately from history. The FA ban, World War I, and the first wave of the feminist movement, all shape and influence her emergence.

This research also adopts a Foucauldian analytical framework, as it offers an effective lens for examining the portrayals of female football protagonists and the diverse roles they

assume, whether in narratives from the early 1920s or more recent accounts. It is used to analyse the power dynamics across the texts, with particular attention to the manifestation of 'biopower,' the operation of discipline and punishment in the regulation of the female footballer and the production of 'docile bodies,' and the forms of resistance that attempt to challenge the constraints imposed on the protagonist's presence on the pitch. Therefore, the female characters in fictional narratives do not remain passive in the face of such inequality. They challenge exclusion, demand recognition, and actively work to improve conditions for women's football actions that align closely with the goals of sports feminism, "easier access and better facilities for women in sports, improved funding and rewards, equal rights with men under the law, top quality coaching on a par with men, and an equivalent voice with men in decision-making" (Hargreaves, *Sporting Females* 42). The concepts of Michel Foucault are further developed in greater detail in Chapter Five.

In Chapter Six, when analysing the prose fiction from 2019 to 2022, the fiction reveals how access to sport is not only gendered but also shaped and "meditated" by class (Hargreaves, *Sporting Females* 51). The intersection of class and gender, as depicted in the texts, helps position women's football as a working-class pursuit. Although they do not all do this in the same way. Though it is important to note that football had a fundamental connection to working-class culture in Britain, that does not necessarily imply that it is only played by working-class people. As Chapter Six and Chapter Seven will also show, the representation of the woman footballer changes after the ban, not least because its class co-ordinates have altered to a degree. The ban can also be understood as having disrupted the previously strong ties between women's football and working-class culture as the refusal to let women play was in turn related to a refusal to let them continue to work in factories, post-war (although this changed too, according to the wishes of the ownership class). Moreover,

the intertextual references to various sports function as coded signifiers that offer insight into the social class positioning of certain protagonists.

Furthermore, Chapter Six analyses a modern body of fiction featuring a female football protagonist to examine how thematic concerns and representations have developed over time. The analysis considers how protagonists' romantic and sexual desires are positioned against the heteronormative structures and how the protagonists navigate these heteronormative environments. The chapter considers Jennifer Hargreaves's foundational work in the field of sports feminism, in addition, the chapter recognises the evolution of theoretical frameworks and their developments. Therefore, the analysis is informed by Heide Eng's scholarship of 'queer' within a sporting context. Before applying these theoretical perspectives, it is important to clarify the underlying definitions of 'queer' within the field of queer theory.

Tracing the roots of queer theory, the term was first coined by Teresa de Lauretis in 1990. Although she does not offer a clear and concise definition of queer theory, her conception of queer theory can be understood to challenge "'hetero-normativity'—the ways in which sexual identities are constructed and enforced in a binary couplet, homosexual/heterosexual—with heterosexuality seen as the dominant and 'natural' term" (Pearson and Simpson 358). To understand how queer theory developed, Kerry Mallan explains that "drawing on feminist, poststructuralist, Foucauldian, and psychoanalytic theories, queer theory began to review and deconstruct categories of gender, sex, and sexuality, arguing the indeterminacy and instability of all sexed and gendered identities" (162–63). Heidi Eng notes, "the emergence of queer theory has parallels with the development of feminist theory." ("Queer Athletes and Queering in Sport" 50) Mallan attempts to define 'queer' as: "[A]n umbrella term that refers to a range of 'nonnormative' sexualities and genders—gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and questioning

(GLBTIQ). In other contexts, queer is a term that resists identity categorizations based on sexual orientation (including heterosexual) (161). However, Heather Sykes draws attention to the limits of queer theory if it is not carefully checked, as it may become more limiting than flexible:

> Queer theory has always had to monitor if, and how, it is producing fixed, exclusionary or domesticated ways of thinking about non-normative sexualities and genders. Like feminist research, queer research has to be critically self-reflexive about how genders and sexualities are formed within local contexts and geopolitical relations of power (584).

In addition, Martin Duberman in the book *Queer Representations: Reading Lives, Reading Cultures* (1997), suggests "'queer' is used as an inclusive synonym for 'lesbian and gay'" (359). This dissertation, particularly in Chapters Six and Seven, employs a queer approach in the reading of the selected texts and films but does not treat queer theory as a rigid theoretical framework. It rather agrees with Eng in how queer theory is better understood as "an interdisciplinary perspective of critical inquiry rather than a clearly defined theory" (50).

The dissertation is mainly concerned with two definitions to analyse queer representation in the selected fiction, 'heterosexuality' and 'heteronormativity'. Heterosexuality is a sexual orientation, while heteronormativity is the social system that treats heterosexuality as the natural and dominant norm. It is reinforced through cultural symbols, social rituals, and social structures built around the assumption of a male–female couple (Eng, "Queer Athletes and Queering in Sport" 51). Eng describes heteronormative cultures and the expectations that align with them: "In heteronormative culture heterosexuality is not only expected and the dominant way of living, it has the status as norm, and is often referred to as what is 'natural'" (51). The characters in Chapter Six completely show up in a heteronormative setting therefore the way queer lens is employed stems from the fact there is a risk in expressing their sexual desires that do not conform with this heteronormative culture. Queer theory challenges the assumption of heterosexuality as the

dominant norm and draws attention to how heteronormative discourse marginalises sexual practices that fall outside it. (51) However, "Heteronormativity might breed homophobia or homonegativism and lead to violence, harassment, social stigmatising and negative sanctions against marginalised sexualities" (51).

All in all, queer theory is used as a framework particularly in analysing how characters destabilise the heteronormative culture and step out of heterosexual relations, and how they are received/suppressed in the selected works. In addition, Jayne Caudwell's research on the wider culture of women's football in the UK provides a contextual grounding. This approach informs the analysis of texts including *Kicking Off: The Dick, Kerr Girls* by Eve Ainsworth (2020), *Our Beautiful Game* by Lou Kuenzler (2021), and *All Together Now: The Dick, Kerr Girls* by Eve Ainsworth (2022), where representations such as the lesbian protagonist emerge. Contemporary fiction such as *Lily and the Rockets* by Rebecca Stevens (2019) and *Our Beautiful Game* also shed light on the figure of the tomboy protagonist examining how sexuality and gender expression are represented in relation to heteronormative cultures. Through a queer lens, these characters can be understood as departures from the rigid gender roles embedded in the cultures depicted in the texts, and the protagonists introduced in Chapter Five, highlighting alternative forms of identity and representation within fictional narratives of women's football.

Heidi Eng's use of storytelling and poetry in "Sensitive Studies, Sensitive Writings: Poetic Tales of Sexuality in Sports" presents athletes' sexual experiences demonstrating how creative forms of expression can communicate emotions and lived realities that are often constrained in traditional scientific research (205). This approach informs the methodological perspective of this thesis, which uses narrative and literary analysis to explore broader themes in sport. Through storytelling, the novels examined in this study give voice to young characters exploring their sexual desires, particularly those that exist outside heteronormative

cultural expectations. This is especially significant within the social and cultural context of World War I Britain, which forms the setting of the selected texts.

In Chapter Seven, the dissertation continues to examine the representations of the female football protagonist through a sports feminist lens but is also informed by Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze and John Berger's querying of the same phenomenon, offering a nuanced exploration of visual representation. Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" and Berger's *Ways of Seeing* critiques of how women are depicted in visual media as passive objects of visual consumption. This chapter argues that Dorothy in *Gregory's Girl* manoeuvres and attempts to control the male gaze and ultimately redirects the gaze at play. On the other hand, *Bend It Like Beckham* largely avoids framing its protagonists, Jess and Jules (Keira Knightley), through the male gaze, allowing the female protagonist more room to claim agency. Nevertheless, the protagonists do not fully escape this gaze, as it is manifested in the mothers of the protagonists. In addition, Jayne Caudwell's insights on female lesbian characters in sport films informs the analysis. Jayne Caudwell's framework on gender and sexuality that stems from queer theory informs my analysis of a possible queer-coded reading of the protagonists particularly in the film *Bend It Like Beckham*. Despite the apparent maintenance of heteronormativity in both films, I observe the role of women footballers in inviting a 'queer' reading to the romantic relationships that the protagonists get involved in and, more importantly, the ones they do not. Through key insights of sports feminism regarding how lesbianism is understood and represented and the homophobia that can be manifest in such understanding, those relationships are examined concerning how they contribute to the representation of the female protagonist in the selected films.

Chapter Seven continues to survey questions of access and opportunity within the wider framework of sports feminism. While gender, class, and historical context remain

central to assessing the barriers faced by women in sports, this dissertation also foregrounds race as a critical yet previously underexplored aspect. Football, in particular in the UK, remains a site of racism (Caudwell et al. 126). The chapter recognises that women in sport face additional struggles that have not always been widely acknowledged within the broader academic context, particularly in earlier sports sociology scholarship (126), such as documenting the experiences of women of colour and recognising racial and ethnic inequalities as challenges within the game, "whilst changing policies and practices may have facilitated the sports participation of some women – namely, those who are white, middle-classed, heterosexual and able-bodied – the majority of women are still excluded from sport and continue to be ignored and marginalized" (Ratna, "Who Wants to Make Aloo Gobi" 386). In addition, Heather Sykes points out the critical issue of white dominance in the study of sexuality and sport where "white researchers frequently focused only on the experiences of white lesbian and gay subjects without an analysis of racialisation or racism" and the emerging efforts by "feminists of colour" to counter this dominance (584-585).

The dissertation acknowledges the lack of diversity among female protagonists; however, addressing this issue is not its primary focus. Instead, the study examines a protagonist of colour in order to highlight the continuing limitations of representation. Aarti Ratna's work on representation in women's sports, particularly her focus on British Asian girls, provides a relevant framework for this research. Her work is particularly relevant as the only protagonist of colour analysed in this study is Jess in *Bend It Like Beckham*, who is South Asian. Though Aarti is critical of the film as she acknowledges the film's success, but she views it as "problematic" because it "mocked and reproduced stereotypes about women's football and British Asian culture" (Ratna, "British Asian Female Footballers: Intersections of Identity" 160). Aarti also questions the extent of how "accepted and valued" British Asian females in football are (Ratna, "Who Wants to Make Aloo Gobi" 386). Ratna argues that

football, England's national sport, is a major form of "public culture" with significant social, political, and economic influence. She suggests that, despite claims of a post racist and postfeminist society, football continues to expose and reproduce unequal power relations surrounding race, gender, and belonging (Ratna, *A Nation of Family and Friends?* 78).

Ratana suggests, and adopts, an 'intersectionality' approach to understand the underlying issues of race and football, "intersectional plays of identity captures the complex nuanced operation of discrimination, which often rendered invisible in women's football" (Ratna, "Intersectional Plays of Identity" 1). Her work explores how race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality intersect and are articulated within the spaces of women's football among British Asian girls and women (Ratna, "Intersectional Plays of Identity" 2). She suggests, "intersectional analysis is useful as it reveals the ways in which complex inequalities in sport operate together, simultaneously, and in nuanced ways, subsequently revealing why they become so difficult to see, challenge and transform" (Ratna, "British Asian Female Footballers"167). Ratna urges sport sociologists to consider more carefully "multiple and intersectional identities" (161). This 'intersectionality' approach is becoming more common to achieve inclusivity and more visibility in sports. There is growing work by Pape Madeleine, Lucie Schoch, and Akilah Carter-Francique where the 'intersectionality' approach is used as "a tool to understand and redress social inequalities in sport" (5).

Collectively, these methodological approaches, grounded in literary studies, history, sports feminism (sociology), queer studies, and film studies, provide a clear framework for analysing the selected texts and films. This interdisciplinary perspective facilitates a nuanced examination of the female football protagonist across different timeframes and shifting sporting, feminist, and historical contexts. The value of a literary approach to women's football showcases how rigid theories, hard truths, and historical barriers are translated into stories that have the power to shape narratives and deconstruct them. Fiction remains a space

where we dare to imagine and reimagine a different reality, where texts bring life into histories that might have been forgotten, and invite different readings.

Chapter Three: The Context

"Complaints having been made as to football being played by women, the [Football Association] Council feel impelled to express their strong opinion that the game of football is quite unsuitable for females and ought not to be encouraged."
(*Football Association Minute Book, 1920–1923*)

3.1 Introduction

Chapter Three begins with a historical exploration of the progression of women's football in Britain, focusing on a pivotal moment in its history: the 1921 English Football Association ban. This ban serves as a significant historical marker that both reflected and reinforced the societal limitations imposed on women at the time. Through a detailed examination of the history of women's football from this critical point to the present day, the chapter examines how women's football has evolved in the face of ongoing challenges to become a symbol of resilience and progress in male-dominant sports. The chapter aims to trace the incremental improvements in the sport, such as increased visibility, enhanced funding and expanded professional opportunities, which have collectively transformed women's football into a significant cultural and global phenomenon. Therefore, this part of the dissertation seeks to contextualise the current and past state of women's football within the overlapping discourses of feminism and sports. Through this approach, this chapter sets a foundation for understanding the context of women's football that shapes the experiences of the female football protagonists that is the core of this dissertation. The fictional narratives from the past (1921-1923) and the present (2019-2022) that will be explored further in Chapter Five and Chapter Six are steeped in historical contexts, such as the impacts of World War One and the evolution of the feminist movement, offering profound insights into the personal and collective experiences of female athletes.

Throughout history, women's football in Britian has undergone considerable transformation. The 1921 English Football Association ban, where football was deemed

"unsuitable" for females to play, was arguably one of the most stringent trials, which ironically (but also very deliberately) was imposed at the height of women's success on the field. The ban denied women's football teams from accessing the Football Association's pitches, leading to the game that was once popular with participants and spectators alike, especially during the First World War, fading out into the background. Despite these legislative and administrative attempts to eradicate the game, the desire for it to exist was still palpable, and one way or another women found ways to play their game.

Just five days after the FA's decision was made public, women refused to accept defeat. On December 10th, 1921, approximately thirty teams from across England gathered in Liverpool to form the English Ladies Football Association (ELFA) ("The Story of Women's Football in England"). Their resistance was not sufficient to alter the mind of the FA. This ban, which lasted for fifty years, was finally removed by the English Football Association in 1971 and had a significant impact on the development of the women's game. Despite the many challenges, women's football has flourished since the ban was lifted and continues to grow. Today, it is widely recognised that "women's football is the fastest growing sport in England" (Williams, "The Fastest Growing Sport? Women's Football in England" 113) This thesis establishes the key co-ordinates and substance of this vital context before turning to examine how fiction has engaged with, responded to, or reimagined the history of women's football, particularly in relation to the 1921 English Football Association ban. This was a crucial historical moment that also shaped the imaginative space. This extraordinary history should be seen as material of great potential for imaginative investigation and offers a compelling point of connection with literature.

3.2 Origins and Obstacles

One of the first matches recorded in Britain in women's football history is believed to be between England and Scotland. According to *The History of Women's Football* by Jean

Williams, the first unofficial match between the two nations took place in March 1870 (11), whereas the first official game between Scotland and England took place on Saturday, 07 May 1881, at Easter Road, Edinburgh. As reported on Monday 09 May 1881, in the *Glasgow Herald,* Scotland's second most popular daily newspaper, the match drew people's interest and attracted crowds: "a considerable amount of curiosity was evinced in the event, and upwards of a thousand persons witnessed it" (Tim Tate 6). This curiosity, whether driven by the rarity of the event or the spectacle it offered, still resulted in a significant turnout, with the match ending in a 3–0 victory for the Scottish team. Later on, another game was set for the two teams. On 16 May 1881, England and Scotland played at the Shawfield ground in Glasgow (Williams, *The History of Women's Football* 14). The match attracted an even greater crowd than the first one; according to the *Nottinghamshire Guardian*, "Upwards of 5,000 spectators were present" (Tim Tate 6).

This growing number of spectators reflects people's growing novelty in the women's game. Despite the fact that it was a women's football match, the crowd was mostly made up of men: "the absence of the fair sex [spectators] was especially notable" (Tim Tate 7). Considering the fact that "football was the single most popular team sport among men in general, and working-class men in particular, by the late-nineteenth century" (McCrone 167), having a majority of male spectatorship does not come as a surprise. Additionally, the absence of female spectators at women's matches does not necessarily imply a lack of interest. While that may be true for some, it could also be the result of social restrictions placed on women's participation as spectators. It was not the norm for women to be in spaces that did not conform to the given gender roles of that time that mainly focused on her being "the passive submissive lady who stays protected in her domestic sphere" (Anderson 113). According to Tony Mason's *Association Football and English Society,* few working-class women attended football matches. As for married women, it was harder for them to attend

games even if they could afford it because they were supposed to take care of their children and also make sure their husband had a hot meal on the table by the time he was back from Saturday matches (153–56). Arguably, fiction can be regarded as a space that offered women an opportunity to access the game without having to be physically present.

However, it is important to note that not all questions about women's spectatorship can be easily answered. Women's Football is still evolving as a field of study, and the history books that are currently emerging do not cover all aspects of the game. One area that requires further research is female spectatorship. This topic is discussed in "The Ladies Stand", where it is argued that "research on female fans remains slight… [and] much of the recent research that is slowly emerging within the field has a specific focus on women's fandom within contemporary sporting cultures" (Allon 51). Although newspaper reports provide some insight into early football spectatorship, a notable gap remains in the literature, partly explained by the nature of twentieth-century football crowds, which were often densely packed, volatile, and difficult to observe or record in a systematic way. By contrast, the modern period, with all-ticket and all-seater stadiums, this system presents a far easier phenomenon to manage. Therefore, the informal and unpredictable conditions of early football make it difficult to gather knowledge about the experiences of female spectators.

With regard to the earlier point about women and societal limitations, female footballers were not exempt from the boundaries set by society. As a matter of fact, just days after the English women's team played against the Scottish women's team, "the public opinion appears to have turned against the women footballers" (Tim Tate 7). The crowds, who seemed displeased by the fact women were playing football, decided to act violently, which appeared not to be an isolated incident. On some occasions, players were attacked on the pitch, and matches were forced to stop due to the spectators' hostile behaviour, and this is exactly what happened in this match (England vs. Scotland). The *Nottinghamshire Guardian*

reported the violence that happened in the 55th minute of the second match, where the players had to evacuate the field under violent and exceptional circumstances (7). The *Athletic News* detailed the scene: "A few roughs broke into the enclosure, and as these were followed by hundreds soon after, the players were roughly handled and had to take refuge in the omnibus. The crowd then tore up the stakes and threw them at the departing vehicle, and but for the presence of the police some bodily injury to the female might have occurred" (Williams, *The History of Women's Football* 15). Consequently, many female footballers disguised their real identities and played under different names for safety reasons. For example, Helen Matthews is believed to be the founder and goalkeeper of the first Scottish women's team, but her name is not found on any team sheet (Tim Tate 7).

Nevertheless, the vicious events did not stop the young women from playing football. Another match between Scottish and English teams was scheduled for 17 May that year (1881) at Kilmarnock Portland FC. However, the location had to change because Kilmarnock Portland FC refused to host the match in light of previous riots. Helen Matthews decided to move the match to England. So, on 21 May, the two teams played at Hole-i'th-wall, the home of Blackburn Olympic FC in Lancashire's Ribble Valley, where the English team won 1-0. (Tim Tate 9). Despite the previous violent events and misbehaviour on the part of the crowds, they were still allowed to attend the football match. The *Blackburn Standard* newspaper reported that around 4,000 attended the game (9).

Though violence in the 20th century seems like a regular occurrence at men's games, Jean Williams, in her book *The History of Women's Football,* asserts, "Football hooliganism arrived early in women's football" (15). Williams shows that it is inaccurate to assume that hooliganism was exclusive to men's football, as evidence indicates that such behaviour was also present in the early stages of women's football. As mentioned earlier, there is not much research on female spectatorship, Dr Matt McDowell, a sports historian at Edinburgh

University, argues the first ever reported act of hooliganism in football was among female fans. The incident was reported in 1898 in *Port Glasgow Express* and *Observer* newspapers following "a match between Morton (now Greenock Morton) and the now-defunct Glasgow Athletic" ("Riot Girls: Study Finds Females Were the First Football Hooligans | The Herald"). Despite the time gap, these events could still be considered an aspect that contributed to the 1921 ban.

More games followed for England and Scotland. On 30 May, Scotland won against England 2-1 at Queen's Hotel Ground, Sheffield, and on 3 June, the two teams played again at Cattle Market Inn Ground, Liverpool, where the match ended with a tie 1-1 (Williams, *The History of Women's Football* 26). Scotland also beat England 2-0 at Windhill, Bradford (26). On 20 June 1881, the *Manchester Guardian* announced a schedule for the teams playing in Cheetham in Manchester. But both scheduled matches for 20 June and 21 June were forced to stop due to the crowds' violent behaviour (26). It is worth noting that the tickets for those specific matches were surprisingly expensive. The admission fee, as announced in the *Manchester Guardian*, was set at two price points: 1 shilling and 2 shillings (Tim Tate 10). Therefore, "very few persons paid for admission to the grounds, but a great multitude assembled in the road and struggled for sight of what was going on within the enclosure, whilst an equally large number gathered on the higher ground on the other side of the field for a similar purpose" (10). The police were on the ground to enforce order and stop any attempts of entering the ground without paying. But soon, the matter got out of control. This all happened when Manchester, "the backbone of the northern industrial revolution," was already building a reputation for disorder, violence, and crime (11). Therefore, such an event does not come entirely as a surprise.

Another way to interpret those riots is addressed in Tim Tate's book *Girls With Balls: The Secret History of Women's Football,* where he argues that such riots "reinforc[e]

the impression that what was being staged was a spectacle rather than sport" (18). Tate also makes the claim that the increased admission fee feeds into the idea the game is being framed as a spectacle rather than a sport (10). However, this increase in ticket prices does not seem coincidental. Towards the end of the 19th century, the "resistance" towards women's football heightened (Dickens). Arguably, violence was anticipated; therefore, the increase in ticket prices was to deter people from attending, hence there would be fewer riots. This does not imply that commercial imperatives were uppermost, however.

To return to the England vs. Scotland match, as a result of the chaos caused during the game, the final 25 June and 26 June matches were moved to the Cattle Market Inn Ground, where Scotland won 2-1 and 2-0 (Williams, *The History of Women's Football* 27). A third match was supposed to take place on Tuesday, 28 June, but there is no record that it actually took place. From that point, women's football seemed to be fading into the background. It was not until 1894 that women's football, despite the prevalent resistance, strongly regained attention. By that time, "Britain would be a very different country: women's rights, loudly championed by the suffragette movement were attracting admiration and opprobrium in almost equal measure. But above all, football itself would have been re-invented" (Tim Tate 13). This 're-invention' of women's football, one could argue, is linked to the broader socio-cultural shift characterised by the 'New Woman' movement that emerged in the late 19th century and could be viewed as the "predecessor of the suffrage movement" (Oesterreich and Schindler 2). This new movement had an impact on the sporting scene.

This era marked a powerful evolution in the societal role and perception of women, particularly those from the middle class, who began challenging the restrictive norms that had long defined them in public and private domains. In the beginning, the 'New Woman' advocated for changes in social etiquette, striving for the abolition of the need for chaperones (Oesterreich and Schindler 2), which could be seen as a symbol of women's dependence on

men. They also called for other freedoms such as ending long hair and long skirts (2) which could be considered not only impractical but also served as a marker of traditional femininity. Beyond these demands was a deeper and more profound struggle for rights that would fundamentally alter women's role in society. For example, this movement pushed for "extended professional opportunities" (Oesterreich and Schindler 2), a demand seen as the desire for economic and financial independence. In addition, the 'New Woman' strived for "safe independent travel and living" (2) along with the "right to choose one's partner(s)" (2) which could be seen at that time as one of the most radical demands. So, within the context of these demands and others, the revival of women's football is but an extension of broader efforts of the 'New Woman' that strives for different freedoms to include physical liberation (Anderson 114).

The year 1894 emerges as yet another defining moment in women's football history in Britain. Lady Florence Dixie[4], an aristocrat, and Nettie Honeyball, a middle-class woman, (Bertovich 100–01) two advocates for women's rights with a shared vision, joined forces and founded the British Ladies Football Club, "the first organised attempt by women to play association football" (Lee 88). They established the BLFC with a mission to improve women's lives through the game of football. They prioritised and pushed towards full professionalisation of the game so female footballers could become financially independent. This is also highlighted in James F. Lee's article, "The Lady Footballers and the British Press, 1895", which argues that The British Ladies' Football Club was created "to provide football-playing opportunities for girls and young women, but also as a means of making money. Theirs, in effect, was an attempt to create a professional football league for women [at club level]" (88). It is also worth pointing out here that the research so far does not

[4] Lady Florence Dixie was also a "Morning Post's war correspondent in South Africa". She was also known to be a "prominent campaigner for sex equality" (Rinaldi).

indicate whether or not female footballers benefited financially in the early days of the game from the matches they played or any of the admission fees. According to Jean Williams, "It is not recorded what the takings were, how much players were paid, or who benefited financially from the whole enterprise" (Williams, *The History of Women's Football* 27). Ultimately, creating an opportunity and benefiting financially from it were two important goals for the British Ladies' Football Club.

In addition, Nettie Honeyball, which was the pseudonym for Mary Hutson (Bertovich 100), championed and advocated the idea that football could be a strong source of empowerment for women. In one of her interviews, published in *The Sketch* on 6 February 1895, she made it clear that her overarching intention in founding the association was to give young females a voice through sports. She was a strong believer in the capabilities and potential of the women of Victorian society, far from how the opposite sex viewed women as "ornamental and useless creatures" (Williams, *The History of Women's Football* 16). Her hopes for women were not limited to the football field. She longed for a time when women were allowed to be involved in the political sphere, have a place in Parliament, and have a say in big and small decisions, especially those that directly affected women (17). With the power of Lady Florence Dixie's influence, social status and remarkably intrepid character, together with Nettie Honeyball's visionary leadership, forces united to realise the transgressive and revolutionary potential of football as a socially transformative phenomenon, capable of treading across the full spectrum of the class structure.

It is important to put the founding of The British Ladies' Football Club into the perspective of the wider politics of class and football that were taking shape at the time. Nancy F. Anderson's book, *The Sporting Life: Victorian Sports and Games,* states an important aspect that speeded the change in the Victorian society, is the emergence of the "middle-class women". Their participation and involvement in sports helped in reshaping

women's social lives" (113). The Lady Footballers positioned themselves as middle class and were intentional in maintaining that identity. Though by the end of the nineteenth century, football had become a decidedly working-class sport (Lee 92), "women of the working classes were much less involved, because the requisite schooling, money, and time for leisure activities were lacking, and because of their subservient relationships with men of their own class and with women of higher classes" (McCrone 159). The statement made by Nettie Honeyball in the *Maidenhead Advertiser, "*If I accepted all the girls from the masses that made application to join us, why our list would have been filled long ago" (Lee 92–93) seemed to suggest an intentional exclusion of other women from working or lower classes. At the same time, it has significance for its acknowledgement of the mass potential of the game.

The Lady Footballers' aim was also to help professionalise the game, which brought them into direct conflict with amateur ideals. As James F. Lee puts it, "Amateurs abhorred the corrupting influence of money and emphasis on the gate, tainting the purity of sport" (93). However, such concerns were not shared by the Lady Footballers. By playing for money, they aligned themselves with professional male players, as a result "provoking 'the contempt of middle-class idealists for professional football'" (93). This was also all happening within the broader context of "class conflict in football": "Class conflicts between the conservative, amateur-dominated Football Association and the professional Football League" reflected the resistance of the middle and upper classes towards the "professionalising of football" (92). Despite historical resistance and delays in professionalising women's football, the scene is different today. In the 2018/2019 season the women's league in the UK became fully professional for the first time (Stead 15).

3.3 Football and Freedom

At this point, it is hard not to agree with Tim Tate's observation on the correlation between the increased awareness of women's rights and football. It is evident that women being more

vocal and aware of their rights helped women's football rise again (19). The strong push for greater recognition of the game as mentioned earlier through The British Ladies' Football Club, alongside efforts to formalise it and align it with the women's rights movement, made the presence of women's football increasingly visible. The rise and fall of the women's game should not always be understood in terms of its literal existence and disappearance, but rather in how it has fluctuated within the public's consciousness. This visibility has often depended on the space permitted by male-dominated authorities and the degree of media support or resistance. The British Ladies' Football Club played a crucial role in lending legitimacy to the sport and symbolising its potential as a transformative tool for progress and possibility. However, this does not mean that all women of the time agreed.

Some women did not seek any change to the status quo, but others were revolutionary in their desire to overturn laws that denied them the space to exist as full citizens and excluded them from decision-making, such as the right to vote. Those who took it upon themselves to make a difference called for social change, political rights, and demanded "physical freedom from the stifling inactivity of Victorian ladyhood. Women demanded the right to exercise their bodies, to play outdoors, and, most controversially, to compete in sports, even as their brothers, husbands, and sons did" (Anderson 113–14). Nonetheless, it was a huge challenge for women to unchain themselves from the "Victorian sexual ideology" which stipulated that "the concept of femininity was the opposite of the active, strong, competitive athlete. A true woman was essentially frail, sheltered in her sphere, under male protection. She was cooperative, while man, her complementary opposite, was competitive. A woman should not sweat, nor exert herself, and certainly not in public" (114). Therefore, demanding physical freedoms and expanding the scope of these demands is not solely about playing the game. It is also a means of cultivating public acceptance of football, serving as an act that challenges existing norms and helps to create new understandings of women's

presence and potential in society. It resists the narrow, limiting ideas of what women should or should not be, offering instead a broader vision of female identity and agency through the game of football.

Although women's efforts and hard work helped women's football continue to move forward, one event made the game even more popular for women: the First World War. When World War I started in 1914, men were sent to war, so women had to step into the workforce and expand their roles beyond the traditional ones to fill the gap. This does not necessarily mean that working outside one's own house was a new role for many women as live-in jobs, for example, were very popular during that time in Britain; however, the work they were doing was of a new kind. According to *The History of Women's Football*, "Before World War One, a large proportion of young working-class women worked in service, meaning that they lived in homes of other people as domestic servants" (49). However, after the start of the First World War, women were employed in factories, doing dangerous jobs and working in poor conditions. Women were underpaid and discriminated against just because of their gender. For the same jobs men used to do, women were employed "on half the pay […] for the same grinding twelve-hour shifts, six days a week. The work was dirty and dangerous, with 'munitionettes' filling explosive shells by hand" (Lewis 182). However, when women started working in the munitions factories, they also began to play football, just like men used to do during their breaks from labour (183). Henceforth, factory teams began to form and develop. For example, "The Dick, Kerr & Co. factory in Preston, named after its founders W. B. Dick and John Kerr, had their own sports pitches, and soon a rough women's football team had formed" (183). It is worth mentioning that "historians of sport are only now realizing that among the most important sites of sport for working-class females were factories and offices which provided games schemes for workers" (McCrone 172). This development is directly tied to issues of class. As women entered factory work, they were

increasingly identified as part of the working class. Given that football had, by the turn of the century, become firmly associated with male factory workers and the broader working-class culture, it was arguably a natural progression that working-class women would also begin to participate in the sport.

Employers seemed to support sports that required teamwork such as football as they saw it as a means to boost productivity. Workplaces often encouraged football as a "rational recreation" and a good way for young women to spend their free time, instead of going to places like pubs, music halls, or cinemas (Williams, *The History of Women's Football* 50). It is important to note that those teams did not just play football for fun or as a distraction; they also used their fame and talent to help those affected by the war. Consequently, it could be argued that factories choosing to use their teams for a good cause helped the game increase in popularity: "During the First World War, factories had promoted their women's football teams as fundraisers for good causes" (Lewis 186). One of the most famous success stories in women's history is the Dick, Kerr Ladies match that took place on Boxing Day 1920. The Dick, Kerr Ladies team played against St Helens Ladies at Goodison Park stadium in Liverpool. Records show that around 53,000 spectators attended the match, whereas around 14,000 were left outside the stadium (Coleman). This record-breaking match raised about £3,115 (Tim Tate 164), which is equivalent to about £140,000 in today's money (Wrack, 'How the FA Banned Women's Football in 1921 and Tried to Justify It'). Such an achievement positively impacted the status of women footballers in society. According to "Ray of the Rovers': The Working-Class Heroine in Popular Football Fiction, 1915–25" by Alethea Melling, "'Ladies Football' […] was commanding huge crowds and raising large sums for charity, while elevating the status of women both in their communities and within their redefined roles, proving that they could function perfectly well within the spheres that

convention had denied them for so long" (97). Women's football was a source of empowerment for those players, and they utilised it for a good cause.

In addition, the shift in convention, particularly in relation to dress, played a crucial role in enabling women to participate more freely in football. As restrictive clothing norms began to loosen, players gained greater physical freedom, making the game more accessible and practical for women. According to Helen Lewis, in her book *Difficult Women: A History of Feminism in 11 Fights*, "trousers" made a difference in the women's game (189), "in 1900, women footballers wore 'knickerbockers' – baggy shorts gathered at the knee – along with thick stockings. By around 1920, recognisably modern shorts had been introduced" (184). Consequently, this meant that women could step out of heavy undergarments, making playing football and other sports easier. This achievement could not have been possible without the efforts of the Rational Dress Society, founded in 1881 (Anderson 114).

It is also important to mention that the press was not always kind to the female players regarding their clothing. This could be due to the fact that the footballers' outfits were practical and far from what a typical Victorian lady would wear. They were freed from "tight-laced corsets and heavy long skirts" (Anderson 114). This could also be seen as women's football detaching itself from the idea of it being a spectacle or a show and having it be taken more seriously as a sport. But once again, this was not received well. To illustrate, on 20 June 1881, *The Manchester Guardian* described the outfit of the ladies in one of England vs. Scotland matches in a report under the title "DISORDERLY SCENE AT A WOMEN'S FOOTBALL MATCH" as "neither graceful nor very becoming" (Tim Tate 15). Yet another example of how the press handled women's football attire and presence on the pitch at the time of the game's increased popularity can be seen in cartoons. *The Sketch*, a popular British illustrated weekly magazine, shed light on women footballers from a rather "sarcastic" point of view. This is seen in the cartoonist Thomas Downey's illustration, "The Lady Footballers:

An Anticipation," published in *The Sketch* on 24 October 1894, as the comic sparks controversy in how he portrays female players. It portrays the female players as being more invested in how they look rather than in the match itself. The paper seems to undermine the talent of the female footballers and focuses on their presentation and appearance.



"The Lady Footballers: An Anticipation"

Another significant aspect that helped move the women's game forward was the role of the Football Association. This can be understood as evidence that the Football Association tolerated the women's game only when it suited them. While they did not seem to have an

issue with it during the First World War, they banned it a few years after the war ended. This, in turn, confirms the fundamental precarity of women's football, highlighting that it could not exist in its own right, as it remained dependent on institutional forces that ultimately determined its fate. Due to World War One, the men's league was immensely affected. The Football Association took an extreme decision as it "[…] suspended the men's league, so there was no competition for spectators or grounds" (Lewis 186). Nevertheless, this did not last long. When World War One ended and men returned home, women's roles consequently started to diminish. There was no longer room for her in factories or on pitches and the English Football Association made sure of that.

Whether before or after the First World War, women footballers are often more criticised by spectators, the press, society, and the FA much more than they are praised. Throughout history, women footballers have been excluded in many ways. In *A Beautiful Game: International Perspectives on Women's Football*, Jean Williams highlights this aspect: "the establishment of the Football Association (1863), the Football League (1888) and the club (both professional and amateur) have tended, by and large, to exclude female players by either formal or informal means" (111) [5]. However, despite all efforts to exclude female football teams, women's football was strongly present and had shown huge progress. The ban came at a time when the women's game was increasing in popularity and success, and which enjoyed particular success in the industrial cities of Britain and Northern Ireland: "There were around 150 women's teams by 1921 playing regular, well-attended games, though without a league structure" (Williams, "The Fastest Growing Sport? Women's Football in England" 115). There were teams in Aberdeen, Arundel, Barrow, Belfast, Birmingham,

[5] "After the Football League's inaugural season with twelve clubs in the 1888–1889 season, the League had grown to a second division in 1892–1893, and two regional third divisions were added in the 1920–1921 season, bringing the total number of League clubs to eighty-eight" (Williams, *A Beautiful Game: International Perspectives on Women's Football* 132).

Bolton, Cardiff, Coventry, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Heywood, Lancaster, Llanelli, Newport, Newcastle, Renfrew, Rutherglen, St. Helens, Swansea and Whitehaven, in addition to munitions sides like Bennets of London, along with one-offs like Harry Weldon's Rest of Britain (Williams, *A Beautiful Game* 122). The Football Association's response to this surge in popularity was to take the extreme and historic decision of imposing a radically punitive measure. In December 1921 a ban on women's football was imposed and lasted fifty years. The ban prevented the game from remaining in the spotlight as a popular phenomenon. It was a punishment for the sport's popularity, and the danger it presumably represented.

3.4 The Ban

In *The History of Women's Football*, Jean Williams asserts that the ban on women's football was a result or reaction to the growing popularity of the women's game, "This popularity threatened the revenues of the professional male football establishment, which sought to expand the existing two divisions of the Football League in 1921 to include a Division Three North and a Division Three South, thereby creating a need to protect income streams" (51). Alethea Melling describes the ban as "[…] just another of many attempts to subjugate a sport that was competing strongly with male football in terms of skill, crowds and gate receipts" (Melling, "Ray of the Rovers" 98). However, the Football Association claimed to have its own reasons for the ban. It deemed football as "unsuitable" for females, among other reasons, on 5 December 1921, the Football Association Council meeting agreed on the ban. The resolution was passed and then published on 6 December 1921 in newspapers across the country:

> Complaints having been made as to football being played by women, the Council feel impelled to express their strong opinion that the game of football is quite unsuitable for females and ought not to be encouraged.
> Complaints have also been made as to the conditions under which some of these matches have been arranged and played, and the appropriation of the receipts to other than Charitable objects.
> The Council are further of the opinion that an excessive proportion of the receipts are absorbed in expenses and an inadequate percentage devoted to Charitable objects. For

> these reasons the Council requests the clubs belonging to the Association refuse the use of their grounds for such matches (*Football Association Minute Book, 1920 1923*).

The newspapers represented public opinion as being supportive of the Football Association's decision. They also used "expert" medical opinion to rationalise what otherwise might have appeared as an arbitrary exercise of power. For example, the *Hull Daily Mail* stated, "We are not in the least enamoured of women's football…it is far more certain that medical opinion, on the whole, is against the practice" (Tim Tate 194) While the *Derby Daily Telegraph* published, "On physical grounds alone, football is harmful to women, a point upon which most doctors are in agreement … Nor is a woman seen at her best on a football field, where she loses much of her natural charm in actions that are often devoid of grace" (195). In addition, the *Western Morning News* reported the view of Dr. Mary Scharlieb, the Harley Street physician, who is in favour of the ban, "I consider it a most unsuitable game, too much for a woman's physical frame" (191). What this further indicates is that the key issue was one of biology and control, and that this applied to both the activities and the bodies of women. It is also important to note that in 1902 the FA ruled that "men's teams were not to play women's teams" (Goldblatt 180). It was not for women footballers to decide on whether or not they should play.

The 1921 ban, unsurprisingly, was not welcomed with open arms by women football teams, and it was frequently challenged, "The ban on using FA grounds was not completely successful and it was contested" (Williams, *The History of Women's Football* 60). It is hard to measure how far the resistance went, but figures such as Alfred Frankland, the mastermind behind one of the most famous teams in women's football history, Dick, Kerr's Ladies' team, was leading the fight against the ban: "Alfred Frankland issued a brief statement of defiance: 'The team will continue to play, if the organisers of charity matches will provide grounds, even if we have to play on ploughed fields'" (Tim Tate 193). Therefore, women's football

teams had to find a way to continue playing, so they started to use the pitches of other sports, such as rugby and cricket. The Football Association responded by asking those sports codes to comply with their policy. As a result, "the women's game effectively became a sport played on public land, without the ability to encircle a pitch in order to charge entry, and this initiated a belief, contrary to what had gone before, that women's football was unappealing and lacked the ability to draw paying spectators in their thousands" (Williams, *The History of Women's Football* 52). If the game was to continue at all, it would have to do so informally, or at least outside of the control of the FA.

A notable attempt to reverse the ban by Frankland was when he invited doctors and a Methodist minister to a match between Dick, Kerr, and Fleetwood Ladies on Wednesday, 28 December 1921, so they could judge whether or not the game was suitable for women. The match took place at the training ground of the Dick, Kerr's company at Ashton Park. The game, which was attended by around 3,000 spectators, was in aid of the Preston Poor Children's Clog Fund. After the match, "the medics' spokeswoman, Dr Mary Lowry, duly gave the sport a clean bill of health: 'From what I saw, football is no more likely to cause injuries to women than a heavy day's washing.' And the minister (sadly unnamed in contemporary reports) pronounced that 'there was nothing to disapprove of in women's football'" (Tim Tate 198-199). Still, the Football Association was not indented to rethink its decision. Subsequently, the Football Association even tightened its restrictions on women's football: "Frederick J Wall, the Association's secretary, wrote to clubs and the referees' organisation with a firm new edict, designed to further suppress the women's game: 'No official referee should take charge of a game not recognised by us'" (199). With the FA taking away their recognition of the women's game, the pitches and referees, women's football was destined to decline.

It is important to note that Britain did not only implement a ban on women's football in England, but it also extended to its colonies, such as in the case of Nigeria, suggesting it might have been a formal policy at that time. When the Football Association first implemented the ban on women's football in England in 1921, there were still no signs of the women's game in Nigeria, nor for that matter was there any Nigerian Association for football until 1933. The early signs of women playing the sport started to emerge in newspapers in the 1930s. In 1950, as the game developed, "The British colonial administration, following England's lead, extended the ban to Nigeria" (Onwumechili 2211). Chuka Onwumechili's "Urbanization and Female Football in Nigeria: History and Struggle in a 'Man's Game'" includes the statement of the English FA that was published by the "The Daily Times" in June 1950:

> The Football Association (FA) in England has forbidden the use of the grounds of its affiliated clubs and has ruled that no official of an affiliated club, nor a registered referee, may assist in the organisation or playing of a match in which the players are females. The NFA [Nigerian Football Association] cannot afford to risk the cancellation of their affiliation to the English Association as this would preclude any further tours, international matches, or participation in either the Empire or Olympic Games (2211).

The ban was manifestly a challenging moment for women's football throughout Britain, but the exploration and documentation of women's football history varies significantly across Britain and Ireland, and the consequences of the ban was felt differently across its regions. The article, "'The Game of Football is Quite Unsuitable for Females and Ought Not to be Encouraged': A Comparative Analysis of the 1921 English Football Association Ban on Women's Football in Britain and Ireland" examines the repercussions of the Football Association ban on women's football across Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, and the Republic of Ireland, providing valuable insights into the regional impacts of the policy.

Starting with Scotland, the Scottish Football Association's stand on women's football was "wholly unsupportive," however, "a close examination of the SFA records clearly shows

that no such ban was formalised at that time [1921]" (Skillen et al. 55–56). As a result, women's football in Scotland continued to grow in the years between World War I and World War II, and "the most successful teams of the period were the Rutherglen Ladies F.C. during the 1920s and Edinburgh City Ladies F.C. in the 1930s" (56). But this does not mean that a formal ban was never imposed on women's football in Scotland. In 1949, the Scottish Football Association imposed a formal ban similar to the 1921 ban imposed by the English Football Association as it prevented female players from playing on the Scottish Football Association pitches (56). The ban was formally lifted by the Scottish Football Association in 1974, which comes two years after the formation of the Scottish Women's Football Association, which was not linked to or recognised by the Scottish Football Association (56–57). Whether it was the English FA ban or the Scottish FA ban, both were imposed by thoroughly masculinist institutions that wanted to limit the women's game. Though the Scottish ban seems almost arbitrarily late, for Wales, the Football Association of Wales (FAW) followed the steps of the English Football Association and imposed a formal ban on women's football (Skillen et al. 63) on March 3, 1922. It is worth noting that prior to the FAW official ban, the religious community in Wales had expressed opposition to women playing football. For example, "in 1918, two chapels' congregations from Cwmbwrla (Swansea) objected to women playing on a local park, going as far as writing to the mayor" (63). The FAW ban remained in place for 48 years (64).

Turning to Ireland, women's football in Ireland was inevitably complicated by politics. After the 1921 partitioning of Ireland into the Irish Free State and Northern Ireland, each entity had its own football organisation. The Football Association of Ireland was formed in the Republic, while the Irish Football Association presided over the game in the North (Bourke 243). For Northern Ireland, "women's football was not banned by the IFA" (Skillen et al. 59). As for the Republic of Ireland, the limited availability of sources about women's

football there makes it difficult to conclude anything about the degree to which women's football existed there: "There is no reference in the finding aid for the FAI Archive to anything about women's football in that period [1921]" (60). No proof has been found of a ban being put in place by any sporting governing body in Ireland (66). However, in *Soccer and Society in Dublin: A History of Association Football in Ireland's Capital*, Conor Curran's research shows women's football activity in Ireland was seen at different times, with evidence from 1895, 1921, 1925 and 1927. There was interest in places such as Belfast, Drogheda, Milltown and Derry, and even proposals for a Dublin Ladies' league. However, public protests, limited support and the English FA's 1921 ban on women's football made it difficult for the game to develop (94–95). It is important to mention that, besides the competition from other sports, Ireland's economy could be an essential reason for why the women's game did not advance at the same pace as Britain:

> There is also the consideration that soccer was possibly not played by huge numbers of women as the Irish economy in the Irish Free State was predominantly based on agriculture rather than industry. Thus, limiting the opportunity for many women to access the sport unlike in Northern Ireland and Britain where women's employment appears to have often provided a gateway into the sport (Skillen et al. 60).

So, although the Football Association regarded itself as the prime arbiter of the sport, it was not uniformly influential, and the different Associations nevertheless operated in different ways. At the same time, other European Associations did introduce various bans of their own. For example, women's football in Germany was hit by a ban by the German Football Association in 1955, which was lifted only in 1970 (B. Emonds 145). Upon imposing the 1955 ban, the German Football Federation (DFB) of West Germany considered "that football went against women's nature" (Alcalde and Martí 99). Similarly, France imposed a ban on women's football between the years 1932 and 1975. During World War II, the collaborationist Vichy government, governing France at the time, imposed a ban on women's football "to protect their bodies" (Rial and De Almeida 275). In Spain, the game

faced opposition under the Franco regime, which led to a delay in acknowledging the sport. It was not until 1980 that the women's game was officially recognised (Ribalta Alcalde and Pujadas 254). In addition, in the early 1920s, the Belgian Football Association took a similar step by barring women's teams from playing football until the late 1970s (Balduck and Lucidarme 146). The Netherlands also had a ban on women's football between the years 1938 and 1971 (C. D. Fisher 63). Outside Europe, there were similar moves, Australia imposed a ban on the sport in 1923 and removed it in 1960. Brazil's ban on women's football was in 1941 and lasted until 1979 as it was considered "violent" and "not suitable for the female body" (Yakich 130). Despite the different, yet similar reasons for the bans, the fact remains it was a systematic attempt to limit women's physical freedom.

Those football bans in England and beyond from the 1920s to the 1980s highlight a widespread cultural and institutional reluctance to embrace women's football that significantly impacted the development and acceptance of the sport. Despite the official FA ban, women's football continued, and an English national team continued to take part in international competitions, though these remained unofficial tournaments. One such tournament was the Martini Rosso Cup in 1970, also known as the first unofficial Women's World Cup, organized by the Federation of Independent European Female Football (FIEFF) which took place in Italy. The second unofficial tournament, the Women's World Championship, took place in Mexico in 1971 and was considered the second unofficial Women's World Cup, with England taking part in the competition (C. D. Fisher 63–64). These events suggest that it was only a matter of time before the ban on women's football in England would officially be lifted and teams re-recognised.

But with all the challenges, the game persevered and gradually began establishing its presence on the global stage. Back in England, despite the ban, the landscape of women's football was undergoing slow but significant changes. In the 1960s it started to spark media

interest and attract crowds again (Williams, "The Fastest Growing Sport? Women's Football in England" 116). In reality, however, for the game to grow properly again, the ban had to be lifted. The English Football Association officially did so in 1971, and women's football teams were allowed to play again on men's pitches (Lewis 218). Yet real change was very slow to come, as the 50-year FA ban had a profound legacy effect. Once the ban was lifted, the game remained underfunded and underdeveloped by the FA. It was only in the year 1993 that the FA took over the administration of women's football (218). In addition, "the Women's Super League – the equivalent of the Premier League – was launched only in 2011" (203–04). It was not until 2018 that England had a fully professional women's football league (Dickens) indicating the vast contrast between men's football which is a stupefyingly wealthy sport across the world, with professional leagues, mass audiences and mass media exposure.

In lifting the ban, the Football Association was only acting before legislation would have forced their hand anyway. In 1975, just a few years after the English Football Association ban was officially lifted, the United Kingdom Sex Discrimination Act and the United Kingdom Sports Council "made arguments for gender equality more powerful, leading to improvements in opportunities for females in both the public and private sectors of sport" (Hargreaves and Anderson 6). However, substantial changes by official bodies, mainly the FA and investors' interests, have only been seen in recent years. In September 2018, the FA Women's Super League became fully professional, and less than a year later, in March 2019, Barclays Bank made "the biggest ever financial investment into women's football in England" as the sponsor of the Women's Super League domestic competition (Dunn, *'Unsuitable for Females'* 206). 2021 was another notable year for women's football in England as new deals for broadcast rights were signed by BBC and Sky Sports, and it was "the first time broadcast rights for the women's game in England had been sold separately

from the men's" (207). In addition, in 2018, England had a successful bid for one of Europe's biggest tournaments: Women's Euro 2022. The women's national team made history by breaking attendance records and winning the competition; it was the first time England had won a major tournament (men's or women's) since the 1966 men's World Cup. In August 2023, the women's national team reached the final of the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup that took place in Australia and New Zealand but lost against Spain 0-1. As for the year 2025, the 'Lionesses' won the Women's Euro that took place in Switzerland.

It is important, before wrapping up the history of women's football in Britain, to draw attention to the recent changes in policies where there is yet another ban to add to the history of bans in women's football. In 2025 the English Football Association announced a ban on trans women. From 1 June 2025, "Transgender women will no longer be able to play in women's football in England" ("Statement: Supreme Court Ruling: An FA Update Following the Recent Supreme Court Transgender Ruling"). The ban aligns with The Supreme Court's ruling on the 16 April 2025, "The Supreme Court decided that the terms "man", "woman" and "sex" in the Equality Act 2010 refer to a biological man, a biological woman, and biological sex" ("Supreme Court Judgment on the Meaning of "Sex" in the Equality Act 2010: For Women Scotland"). The trans ban could be arguably understood to protect women only spaces.

The different bans throughout time play a crucial role in shaping and reshaping the game of football for women. Bans that impact women players are not always concerned with sex and gender neither are they straightforwardly to do with control; religion could also be an aspect of discrimination. Practicing Muslims can be excluded from the game and discriminated against because of their religious beliefs. For example: in France, Hijab-wearing women are banned from playing football, coaching, or officiating matches (Trindade). Marion Ogier, one of the lawyers who works with Les Hijabeuses, says: "The

French parliament decided against prohibiting the wearing of religious symbols during sports competitions but the decision did not lead to the FFF to review its rules" (Trindade). There is no FIFA rule that prohibits it and French laws permit hijab-wearing athletes to compete in their headscarves, yet the French Football Federation bans it because "it would break with the principle of religious neutrality on the field" (Méheut and Jaques).

While women's football in England has grown rapidly in recent years, with increased visibility and professionalisation, the first part of this chapter has focused on its earlier history, particularly the 1921 ban and its long-lasting consequences. This historical context provides the foundation for the literary analysis that follows in Chapters Five and Six, which turns to fiction that engages with various moments in the sport's past. These works are not necessarily intended to reflect on the modern game, but on the struggles, silences, and resistance found in earlier periods, as fiction participates in the recovery and reinterpretation of women's roles in football across different historical contexts. Chapter Seven considers the cinematic representation of women's football in the post-ban era, where the ban and its history are entirely absent, even as its lasting effects remain visible.

3.5 Feminism, Sports, and the Academy

As the historical and contemporary context of women's football in England has been established as a necessary foundation for the analysis in later chapters, this section examines the broader presence of women in sport, with a particular focus on football within the context of the feminist movement. In this dissertation, sport serves as a symbol of expanding freedoms for women, and this discussion aims to consolidate the academic framework for studying women in sport. This is essential for progressing to later analytical sections, which integrate the history of football and the evolution of the feminist movement, thereby recognising women in sport as a significant field of academic inquiry.

Over the course of history, there have been different progressive movements advocating for women's rights and calling for equality in varied domains of life. This is most famously seen through the different waves of feminism. Historically, four waves of feminism have been identified by feminist historians and discussions continue about the emergence of a possible fifth wave (Mooney 56). Marking the precise origin of the feminist movement is a complex task due to its rich and evolving history. Mary Wollstonecraft's 1792 *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* arguably remains one of the most influential works that shaped feminist thought (Scobie 12). Like their male counterparts, Wollstonecraft believed women should have the same "social, legal, and intellectual" rights (Castle, *The Blackwell Guide to Literary Theory* 94). It is noteworthy to highlight that her work was initially seen as unpopular but was later revered as a "Bible" by leading feminists (O'Neill 14). Wollstonecraft's foundation laid the groundwork for more concrete pursuits of equality, signalling the beginning of the first wave of feminism. Her work also introduced some tensions that feminists addressed in later movements.

The 'first wave' of feminism could be traced to the late 1800s to the mid-1900s. The efforts of this wave were mainly focused on securing legal rights for women, most importantly, the right to vote (Castle, *The Blackwell Guide to Literary Theory* 94). The backdrop of this transformative period, which includes the years leading up to and succeeding the First World War, was a time of significant social and political turmoil. The novels in the chapters to follow reflect this turbulent yet progressive era, offering insights into the experiences and struggles of women during the first wave of feminism.

Building on foundational achievements of the first wave, the 'second wave' of feminism focuses on women's liberation in various spheres of life (Osborne 25), including the demand for civil rights, particularly the call for social and economic equality for women (94). In addition, attempts to recognize women in sports coincide with the efforts of the

'second wave' of feminism and the years following it. The second wave of feminism created the foundation for women's participation in sports to continue growing and be accepted by the general public. It resulted in more visibility for female athletes and an ongoing conversation about gender equality in sports. The late 1980s marks the beginning of the 'third wave' of feminism, which, in a way, builds on the efforts of the second wave, but it is more inclusive as it addresses "problematic elements of second-wave feminism, such as the dominance of White, European, middle-class feminist theorists and leaders of feminist movements" (Mooney 60). As for the fourth wave, it is generally considered by historians to have begun between 2010-2012, and centred on "reproductive rights, equal pay, body-shaming, and sexual assault" (Allred 205). It focused on the "empowerment of women, sexual minorities, and other oppressed groups as well as the use of the internet and technology to educate and uplift women and girls around the world" (Allred 205). Peter Lawler explains further the impact of the internet and the rise of social media on this wave of feminism, which he also considers a distinct feature of the fourth wave. He sees that social media and the internet have made it easier for feminist activists to connect worldwide to campaign and debate but also acknowledges the dark side of it where the same spaces have "produced new forms of sexual harassment and expressions of misogyny (hatred of women) or misogynoir (hatred directed at Black women)" (385). It is also important to note here, while some scholars question the usefulness of the term 'wave(s)', this dissertation adopts the term as a convenient way to identify particular historical periods and their key demands. So, every wave of feminism expanded upon the work of its predecessor, but notably, the second wave made considerable strides in acknowledging women's roles in sports.

Writing about sports is not a recent phenomenon. In the West, sports writing celebrating the lives of athletes, including masculine sports such as football, can be traced back to the beginning of the 19th century (Hargreaves and Anderson 5). The writings come in

different forms, including: “sports reports, histories, autobiographies, biographies, films, and novels” (5). However, those writings did not always document and include women’s engagement in sports (5) as “researchers, feminists and feminist researchers have failed to focus on women’s sport” (Dunn, *Football and the Women’s World Cup: Organisation, Media and Fandom* 2). This issue was not addressed until the 1970s when female sports academics put the spotlight on “the marginalization of women in sport and in the academy” (Hargreaves and Anderson 6). As a result, the late 1970s and the 1980s witnessed more recognition of women’s involvement in sports and the evolution of sports in the context and framework of feminism.

In “Feminist Theories for Sport,” Susan Birrell sets a timeline for the evolution of feminism and sports starting from the 1970s. In that decade, England, the US, and North America were looking closely into important issues in sports that impact women, such as “the dominance of masculine values in sport … the place of girls and women in sports … [while] documenting inequalities and arguing for the expansion of opportunities for women” (63). However, the most significant contributions, as Birrell states, are the two important books published in 1978 along with a few conference papers. The first book, *Women in Sport: From Myth to Reality,* edited by Carole Oglesby, explores the relationship between women, sports, and society, focusing on feminist perspectives. The book provides a comprehensive historical survey of women’s involvement in sports, spanning from ancient Greece to the present era. It argues that although a small number of women have had access to sports throughout history, societal norms have generally discouraged or completely denied this opportunity to the majority of women. The second book, *Sports and Gender: a Feminist Perspective on the Sociology of Sport* by Ann Hall, investigates the role and portrayal of women in sports, considering diverse social and cultural factors. The book provides a meticulous examination of how societal norms and stereotypes have impacted women’s involvement and portrayal in

sports, with a particular emphasis on gender roles and feminism. In addition, the papers presented by Ann Hall, Nancy Theberge, Mary Boutilier, and Cidny SanGiovanni at the 1980 NASSS (The North American Society for the Sociology of Sport) conference in Denver are also considered significant contributions (Birrell 64).

Those inputs, along with the different ideologies and approaches recognised within the 'second wave' of feminism, impact the study of women in sports. For example, in the 1980s, the 'liberal' feminist approach dominated the study of sport in the context of gender in North America, the UK, and Europe. In a general sense, 'liberal feminism' sees the two sexes, men and women, as more similar than different (Birrell 64) and sees "change within society rather than revolution by putting forward positive role models for girls, establishing equality in their own relationships and lobbying parliament for legislation on equal rights" (Osborne 30). With regard to sports, 'liberal' feminists call to remove the barriers to girls' and women's participation in sports through legislation (Birrell 64). In 1972, for example, the US Congress passed the Title IX of the Equal Rights Amendment Act which "forbade sex discrimination in schools that received federal funding" (De Varona 25) aiming to limit advantages based on gender (Hargreaves and Anderson 6). Therefore, ensuring equal opportunities has been the main goal of feminist efforts in sports. This attempt is closely linked to policies and programmes for equal opportunities for women in sports. Such strategies are typically identified as examples of 'liberal sports feminism' (9).

Following the 'liberal' approach comes 'radical' feminism. Unlike 'liberal' feminism, 'radical' feminists see that men and women are different (Birrell 65). They believe that "male domination in all areas of life had resulted in wholesale oppression of women" (Osborne 29) and that the liberals have not done enough. Therefore, their approach could be seen as an extreme one that calls for drastic and fundamental changes:

> Radical change entails a fundamental societal transformation, not just equal access to the system that already exists […] the radicals argue the entire system must be dismantled and reconstructed from the standpoint of women. The way to accomplish this is not through legislation but through revolution. Another radical solution is for women to establish their own spaces and practices outside the purview of patriarchy. Lesbian separatism is a particularly strong voice in this movement (Birrell 65).

'Radical sports feminism' focuses on "the failure of equal opportunity initiatives, focusing attention on the centrality of sexuality to women's oppression in sport and the redistribution of power through separatism" (Hargreaves and Anderson 9). 'Radical' and 'liberal feminism', however, were both criticised because they only take gender into consideration and tend to ignore other factors such as "class, race, sexuality, age, nationality and religion" (Birrell 65). As a result, "synthetic theories*"* emerged as approaches that bring together insights from multiple theoretical traditions. The first attempt was to combine 'radical' feminist theories and 'Marxism': as a result, 'Marxist feminism' was born (65). Marxist feminists "agree with radical feminists that women are subordinate to men. But they attribute this to the capitalist system of private property, rather than to the sex/gender system itself. For Marxist feminists, class oppression is the primary form of oppression" (McLaren 9). One of the most famous examples of this in Britain was in 1968 at the Ford automobile factory in Dagenham, when the female workers' strike over equal pay paralysed production (*Women: Our History* 275). Following 'Marxist feminism', 'socialist feminism' that concerns itself with "interacting impacts of gender, class, and race" was developed. The issue this time with this 'merge' was race and ethnicity, as this is seen as an "underdeveloped focus in sports studies," especially in conversations about "women of color" (Birrell 66). In addition, gender and sexuality became an important topic in the 1980s, which continued progressing in the 1990s while focusing on lesbian identities in sports (67). These developments highlight the ongoing effort within feminist theory to address intersecting forms of inequality and oppression yet also reveal the limitations and imbalances that persist when certain identities

or experiences, such as race, ethnicity or sexuality, are marginalised within broader theoretical frameworks in sports studies.

3.6 Current Issues and Improvements in the Female Sporting Experience

The recent positive shifts in attitudes and policies have been instrumental in encouraging greater involvement of female athletes in sports. This change enhanced experiences for those already active in this field. This is particularly evident in football, a sport where women historically faced significant challenges and setbacks. As Jane Caudwell notes, football in the United Kingdom has undergone a process of development over a period of approximately 150 years, characterised by the rise of industry and modernisation and modernity. Over the course of its relatively short existence, women have encountered obstacles such as sexism, misogyny, and gendered stereotypes in their quest to be seen as "serious participants and legitimate members of its many cultures" (Caudwell, "Gender, Feminism and Football Studies" 333). The imbalance in the power dynamics of the game, as pointed out and criticised by liberal feminists, is evident in that men and boys, who primarily hold positions of privilege in the sport, often feel a sense of entitlement to these opportunities (332). However, nowadays, the increased prospects and opportunities in football for women and girls, both globally and specifically in the UK, show the influence of progressive political movements linked to liberal feminism (335). That said, the wider developments in women's football reflect the collective efforts of both liberal and radical feminist movements.

So, as women gradually made their way into sports, several changes were required to accommodate their participation. Since 1991, for example, any new sport wishing to join the Olympic programme must take into consideration adding a category for women. Consequently, the 2012 London Olympic Games was historical for women as it was the first time they competed in every sport (European Institute for Gender Equality 6). However, despite the progress in recognising that women in sports are here to stay, equality remains an

issue that can play a role in fewer women getting into sports. A report published by the European Institute for Gender Equality identifies "gender inequalities" as a barrier to women's participation in sports. The report states that "Gender inequalities are evident across the sports sector, from representation at decision-making levels and media coverage, to participation in sports activities including coaching" (5). This section will highlight key improvements in women's sport, while also addressing the ongoing challenges and current issues that persist.

Positive changes in women's football are increasingly evident through improved government policies, enhanced funding support, and a growing commitment from football governing bodies to invest in research and development. On International Women's Day 2023 and following the success of the Football Association's (FA) #LetGirlsPlay campaign, which aims to shift attitudes and ensure that girls have opportunities to play football during lessons, at break times, after school, and in community clubs, a significant step was taken. The campaign was launched by the England women's football team and the English Football Association after they lifted the 2022 Euro cup. The aim of the new boost in funding by the British government is to ensure "equal access to sports, making it clear that girls and boys should be offered the same sports during PE and extracurricular time in schools," which should increase their participation in the sport ("School Sports given Huge Boost to Level the Playing Field for next Generation of Lionesses"). An additional move towards better conditions for players is the advocacy through committees such as The Women and Equalities Committee in the UK Parliament. This committee had several meetings on sexism and inequality in football where, at least in one of the meetings, members of the parliament directed questions to The Premier League and the Football Association about tackling "sexism and inequality in football" which could be seen as a positive step towards more equality in women's football ("Sexism and Inequality in Football – Inquiry").

More research is now being conducted in women's football. For example, FIFA is funding research at Kingston University, London that aims to "investigate [the] role of the menstrual cycle on ACL injuries in women's football" ("Kingston University Receives Funding from FIFA to Investigate Role of the Menstrual Cycle on ACL Injuries in Women's Football"). Another study is Project ACL, "a collaboration between FIFPRO, the Professional Footballers' Association, Nike, and Leeds Beckett University dedicated to accelerating research after calls from players into the concerning number ACL injuries in women's football" ("Project ACL Launch"). Together, such efforts reflect a growing commitment to shaping a stronger future for women's football.

The improving conditions for female footballers in Britain highlight a necessary and overdue shift in the sport. In 2022 the English FA and Professional Footballers' Association signed an agreement on important issues, including "the inclusion of a comprehensive family leave policy, which covers maternity rights, improved illness and injury rights and changes to the termination period in standard contracts for Women's Super League and Championship players" (Wrack, "New Maternity and Injury Cover Deal for Female Footballers in England Revealed"). This agreement could be seen as one of the major changes that has occurred to enhance and improve the welfare of players. In addition, women's football witnessed the beginning of a new era, specifically in terms of contracts, as visible changes could be seen, especially in January 2023 when world-record transfer bids were proposed. For example, there were two bids proposed by Arsenal to buy the English striker Alessia Russo from Manchester United. The second bid was for around £500,000 pounds, but Manchester United refused to sell. Chelsea also proposed a fee of £250,000 for the winger Katie McCabe from Arsenal, but Arsenal also refused to sell. Arsenal and Chelsea were not the only clubs who were willing to pay large amounts of money for players during the January 2023 transfer window. Aston Villa signed Jordan Nobbs from Arsenal for £30,000, while Manchester

United's signing of Lisa Naalsund exceeded £100,000 (Sanders). In addition, short-term contracts may soon be something from the past for the Women's Super League (WSL) players, as now they are more in charge of negotiating their contracts (Sanders). Whether or not this is considered a sustainable change or not, financial stability for players arguably means their time could be entirely focused on football.

Women in different sports are increasingly able to make changes regarding their kits for a better and more comfortable experience. For example, England's women's all-white football home kit changed to blue shorts, adopted for extra protection after players expressed concern about leakage when playing during their periods (Pickworth). Another sport that took this step is tennis. The famous Wimbledon tennis competition relaxed its strict all-white rule for female players due to the same fears and concerns (Mehta). Nevertheless, perhaps the most "controversial" change in kit happened in the Euro 2021 tournament that took place in Bulgaria, where the European Handball Federation fined the Norwegian women's beach handball team 1,500 euros for opting for shorts (like their male counterparts) instead of bikini bottoms. The European Handball Federation considered the new clothing choice "improper." However, following the incident, a campaign by Talitha Stone, an Australian activist based in Norway, "whose petition – supported by gender equality organisation Collective Shout – attracted 61,000 signatures" forced the International Handball Federation to change its rules after they were accused of sexism (Kemp). The most recent effort to enhance athletic experience by providing more comfortable kits for players took place in Ireland. In 2025 Camogie players protested the strict requirement to wear skorts, calling for a change to shorts or at least the option to choose something more comfortable. The issue was debated at the Camogie Association's Annual Congress in 2024, but the motion did not pass. As a result, players have stepped up their protests. The first protest of the year took place on Saturday 3 May 2025, when the Leinster Championship semi-final between Kilkenny and Dublin was

postponed briefly, as players from both teams were instructed to change into skorts before play could begin (McCann). Involving players in the decision-making process is essential to ensure that changes to women's kits genuinely reflect their needs and enhance their sporting experience without unnecessary delays and votes.

Although women's sport has made progress, major inequalities remain, such as the gender pay gap. Despite a considerable difference in earnings and revenues between men's and women's football, more and more national teams are moving to equal pay for their players, including the United States of America, Spain, England, Ireland, Wales, and Canada. In addition, Gianni Infantino, FIFA's president, announced that in the next four years, with the target of the 2027 Women's World Cup, FIFA is looking into equal prizes for the next women's and men's World Cup (Brookes), an announcement that received heavy criticism under the claims the women's game does not generate the same profit as the men's game; therefore, players should not receive equal pay. However, inequality is prevalent in the unequal pay between male and female athletes. Taking football as an example, while professionalism in women's football is growing in the UK and well-established in other countries such as the USA, a gap remains in earnings. For instance, in an article published by the BBC in 2022 by Simon Read, "How Much Do Women Footballers Get Paid?" a comparison was drawn between the pay of the two England captains, Leah Williamson and Harry Kane. Williamson, who led England to win the Euro 2022 final, annually earns the equivalent of what Kane earns in a week as a Premier League player (Read). Although progress has been made to support women's participation in sport, issues such as unequal pay highlight the ongoing disparities between the men's and women's games, showing that significant reform is still needed to achieve true equality.

Another area where inequality is evident in women's sport is the preference for giving prime-time coverage to men's events over women's events. In the 2025 French Open (also

known as Roland-Garros) tennis tournament came under attack as the majority of primetime slots were given to the men's game. Grand Slam tournaments are typically the most viewed and widely broadcasted, providing players with valuable visibility. The tournament director Amélie Mauresmo's 2022 remarks that men's matches are "more appealing" continues to draw criticism, as it reinforces the perception that women's tennis is less worthy of attention and suggests a deliberate choice to keep the women's game out of the spotlight (*French Open Gender Equality: Outcry Grows Over Prime-Time*). Ons Jabeur, the Tunisian tennis player, is very vocal on the deliberate choice of organisers and broadcasters prioritising the men's game over the women's game in scheduling slots, in her own words, she shared a post on social media, where she acknowledged the greatness of the men's game but insisted that, "honouring one side of the sport shouldn't mean ignoring the other" (Poole). Such imbalances in exposure limit the visibility and development of women's sport and hinders its growth and progress.

In addition, as a result of the ongoing debate on trans girls and women participating in women's sports, some sporting bodies such as Swim England, British Cycling, and FINA (the International Swimming Federation) were forced to make some policy changes favouring "fairness" over "inclusivity" by banning trans women from competing with biological women. This decision comes at a time when more and more female athletes are giving up sports due to the participation of trans women in the same category as women. Hannah Arensman and Riley Gaines are two examples of how the inclusion of trans girls and women in sports led them to quit. In 2022 Hannah Arensman, a professional female cyclist who is a 35-time winner of the national cyclocross circuit, decided to give up the sport she excelled at after losing to the trans cyclist Austin Killips. Arensman explains how frustrating it is to compete in a sport where she will "lose no matter how hard I train" due to the physiological and biological differences between the two sexes (Pennock).

The debate on this matter continues, especially following the UK's Supreme Court ruling on 16 April 2025, which stated that the definition of a woman is based on biological sex. This decision could have future implications on sports, where stricter regulations may soon be introduced. An article published by the BBC on the same day as the ruling highlights reactions to the decision, some expressed disappointment, while others expressed support. Over a hundred elite British sports women stated that they would feel "uncomfortable with transgender women competing in female categories in their sport." However, "many of them expressed fears over sharing their opinion publicly because of concerns they would be seen as discriminatory" ("What Does the "Definition of a Woman" Ruling Mean for Sport?"). Less than two months from The Supreme Court's ruling, the English Football association announced, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, that from 1 June 2025, "Transgender women will no longer be able to play in women's football in England" ("Statement: Supreme Court Ruling: An FA Update Following the Recent Supreme Court Transgender Ruling") aligning with The Supreme Court's ruling on the 16 April 2025 and FIFA regulations.

According to FIFA, "FIFA Competitions are separated for men and women [...] For FIFA men's competitions, only men are eligible to play. For FIFA women's competitions, only women are eligible to play" (*Regulations FIFA Gender Verification* 4,7). FIFA does not carry out any "gender testing verification examinations," instead, it puts the responsibility on the official football associations of each official member:

> Each participating member association shall, prior to the nomination of its national team, ensure the correct gender of all the players to be considered for such nomination by actively investigating any perceived deviation in secondary sex characteristics and keeping complete documentation of the findings (*Regulations FIFA Gender Verification* 7).

The examination can be intense and, as Nilla Fischer, a former Swedish player, describes it, "humiliating". In her book, *I Didn't Even Say Half of It*, she shares the details of the physical examination the women's football team competing in the 2011 Germany World Cup

underwent upon FIFA's request, to determine the sex of the players ahead of the tournament. The medical team's testing included exposing players' private parts instead of DNA swabs (Ingle). Any player who refuses to undergo the physical examination suffers the consequences of suspension. The rule is that the player who refuses the examination will not be allowed to play in "the following international match and/or competition by the Disciplinary Committee. The Disciplinary Committee can [also] impose further sanctions" (*Regulations FIFA Gender Verification* 12). Finding the balance between fairness and inclusion remains a challenge in sport when addressing diversity and gender. Continued efforts are needed to move towards a more equitable approach.

Lastly, with the advances made in women's sports, it is fair to say the future is promising. The positive change in attitudes, policies, and regulations should help increase the percentage of girls and women involved in playing, officiating, coaching and administering sports. Now, more than ever, talented athletes, coaches, and referees are increasingly visible, with many considered role models. However, while women's football in the UK has seen notable success and increased attention in recent years, some studies indicate a decline. There has been a decline in television audiences for the Women's Super League in the UK this season 2024/2025 by 35% from last season 2023/2024 (Garry). This could suggest that women's football in the UK is struggling to maintain consistent interest through the traditional means of TV sport broadcasting. This is happening in the wider context of the success of the England women's team, including winning the 2022 UEFA European Championship and reaching the final of the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup.[6] Therefore, the issue does not seem to be one of recognition, access, and exposure. Women's football is at a point where more funding is being poured into it, officially supported, and widely promoted. However, there has been a noticeable increase in engagement on social media in women's

[6] This is prior the 2025 and Women's Euro win.

sport in general (Garry). On social media the players' role as an athlete extends to that of assuming the role of an influencer or celebrity. Players are becoming more popular on social media where arguably content is short and easy to follow, and truncated highlights of the games are a click away, whereas a football match is ninety-plus minutes.

Looking at the improvements in women's sport, alongside the ongoing inequalities and current debates, a clear pattern emerges, women's sport remains in a constant state of transformation, striving towards a point where equality, fairness, and visibility are secured rather than continually demanded and fought for. These ongoing dynamics influence how upcoming novels and films are understood, not only in relation to the broader context of the past but also through the lens of the present, highlighting both the existing gaps and the progress achieved in improving women's sports and the players' rights.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter provided an examination of the history of women's football in Britain, focusing on the pivotal 1921 English Football Association ban. It did so to provide a proper sense of contextualisation of the complex field that women's football occupies in England, flourishing then forbidden, a sport and a spectacle, something so potentially popular that it had to be banned. The ban not only curtailed the momentum of the sport but also mirrored broader societal constraints on women's roles during that time. By tracing the sport's evolution from this critical juncture, the chapter has illustrated the gradual but undeniable progress in women's football, highlighting improvements such as increased visibility, funding, and professional opportunities that have reshaped the female sporting experience in contemporary times. The chapter also situates the current state of women's football within the broader discourse of feminism, sports, and academia, illustrating how these fields intersect to influence public perception and policy. Moreover, this chapter sets a critical foundation for analysing the fictional texts that form the core of this dissertation. It argues that these

narratives, which are deeply embedded in historical contexts, like World War I and the progression of the feminist movement, offer indispensable insights into the personal and collective experiences of female athletes. These stories do not merely reflect historical realities; they engage with and challenge them, offering new perspectives on the struggles and victories of women in football. By introducing the history, the chapter is preparing the way for literary explorations in subsequent chapters. This historical context is necessary for understanding how these fictional representations echo, critique, and expand upon the real-world narratives of women's football. This approach not only enriches our comprehension of the texts but also highlights the transformative power of sports as a cultural and feminist arena within which agency is discovered and fostered. The next chapter will focus on the taxonomy of football fiction, outlining its definition and origins. It will also position women's football within this literary category, discuss the notable disappearance of women's football fiction, examine its recent re-emergence, and trace the fictions' evolving narratives and cultural significance.

4. Chapter Four: The Fiction

"Sometimes reality is too complex. Stories give it form."
(Jean-Luc Godard)

4.1 Introduction

This chapter begins by exploring the origins and evolution of football fiction, outlining its various categories and characteristics. It focuses in particular on situating women's football fiction within the taxonomy developed by Lee McGowan, while also extending his work by highlighting recent growth in the field. The chapter then investigates possible reasons for the presence and absence of female football protagonists in fiction, especially in works aimed at young female readers. Finally, the chapter concludes by highlighting key traits of the emerging wave of football fiction featuring female players, noting its focus on historical narratives and young adult audiences. It also raises questions about the importance—or lack thereof—of historical accuracy in these works, and considers the impact that young adult fiction may have on its readers.

The previous chapter established the historical context of the women's game of football, situated women's sports within academia and the broader context of the feminist movement, and the current issues in women's sports at large and football in particular. The field of football fiction largely features narratives about male footballers, reflecting the sport's historical development and gender dynamics. However, broadly, football fiction is also limited; most of the writing where football is a central concern takes the form of biographies and autobiographies. It might be that there is a relative lack of serious adult fiction about football because those interested in the game do not see it as an apt space for performing the kind of enquiries that go with serious fiction. The history of the men's game is a relatively straightforward account of a male-dominated game in a male-dominated world. Yet that dominance might also be something that generates a weight of uncertainty and

anxiety, which is where a work of fiction like David Peace's *The Damned United* (2006) might intervene. Arguably, *The Damned United* can be read as a kind of feminist novel because it dismantles and deconstructs cherished myths of masculinity so effectively.

Historically, this male-dominated game has grown consistently with minimal to no interruptions. In contrast to the hegemony enjoyed by the men's game, the history of women's football has been marked by significant disruptions and restrictions by male authorities, resulting in the limited presence of women's football and, in part, its absence from literary representation. The suppression of women's football mirrors the historical marginalisation of women in the sport. It also means that the narratives are few and far between. The ban on the playing of women's football also was in effect a ban on the creative imagination of women playing it.

This history of the women's game is consequently a strange kind of patchwork, full of achievements yet overshadowed by disappointments and perforated with silences. In the beginning of the twentieth century, women's football became a source of inspiration for fiction writers. As will be discussed later in the chapter, the authors of these works are either known to be male or remain unidentified, with some speculation that they may have been written by women, though no definitive records exist. This form of writing can be traced back to the beginning of the 1920s, only to fade out, arguably, as one of the consequences of the 1921 English FA ban. However, a more substantial body of work about the female protagonist in football began to emerge within a short span in 2019. By this time, nearly 50 years after the lifting of the ban, woman footballers had become an active component of the literary imagination. It is important to note that fiction was not entirely absent during the intervening period; several works were published between these two timeframes. In this research, 2019 is used as a reference point to mark the beginning of this new and noticeable 'wave' of publications.

Wendy J. Glenn and Danielle King-Watkins find that there is limited interest in studies of sports fiction specially the fiction targeting a young readership, and say that there is a particular gap in research on athletic female protagonists (291). My research both seeks to acknowledge the emergence of a significant literature about female footballers and the foundation of a more evolved critical discourse on the subject. This chapter argues that the historical marginalisation of women in football and their limited representation in football fiction reflect and challenge gender biases in sports. However, it also highlights the critical gap in engagement and addressing of these disparities. These disparities influence literary elements in football fiction, such as themes of exclusion and punishment, character portrayal as victims or heroes, and narrative dynamics where female footballers overcome challenges that limit them, as women and football players, within the genre. Beyond the male dominance of the game and the imagination of it, I seek to show the female footballer in her own words and her own right.

4.2 The Origins: General Overview

Football fiction is part of the broader literary category of sports fiction. This type of fiction is defined by Mary Jo Kane" as a text "in which sport plays a dominant role or the sports milieu is the dominant setting" (234). According to Kane, the start of this genre could be traced broadly back to the late 1800s, but was at its most popular in the early 1900s. However, LeeAnn Kriegh and Mary Jo Kane argue that sports fiction "today, [...] struggles for attention and critical acceptance as a literary subgenre" (28). According to Lee McGowan, a pioneer in the field of football fiction, the origins of football fiction started in the late 1870s (McGowan, *Football in Fiction* 16). It is important to mention football entered the imagination well before that, and long before the Football Association was founded in 1863. For example, football in literature can be seen in works as early as the English playwright John Webster's *The White Devil* from 1612. In one of his character Francisco de Medici's murderous

proclamations, he states: “Like the wild Irish, I’ll ne’er think thee dead/Till I can play at football with thy head” (III.ii). Another notable example could be found in William Shakespeare’s *King Lear* (1606), when Kent Goneril’s insubordinate servant Oswald as “You base football player!” (Shakespeare 1.4.86). It is evident here football was often associated with violence, but with the advent of the FA it took on a more orderly aspect.

The early writing accounts took different forms, including short stories, novels, periodicals, and, most importantly, comics (McGowan, *Football in Fiction* 16). However, it remains uncertain who was the first to introduce this type of fiction. In Alexander Jackson’s “The Father of Football Fiction? A.S. Hardy and the Popularisation of Association Football Fiction in the Boys’ Story Papers of the Amalgamated Press, C1900–1939,” Arthur Joseph Steffens, known as A.S. Hardy, is identified as the one who ‘invented the genre of football stories’ (97). “Since the 1900s he had been a prolific producer of sporting stories for several generations of readers of boys’ papers produced by the Amalgamated Press” (96). However, this is not necessarily accurate because Thomas Hughes in *Tom Brown’s Schooldays* (1857), includes a fictional episode of a football game. Yet Jackson argues that “in terms of the fictional story focusing solely on Association Football, particularly within the world of professional football, Hardy has strong grounds to be considered the pioneer of football fiction” (97). “Nonetheless, H. Frederick Charles’ *The Boys of Highfield*: or, the *Hero of Chancery House”*[7] (1878) challenges Hardy’s assumption of being the founder of the football fiction genre (McGowan, *Football in Fiction* 16). Furthermore, Arnold Bennett and his 1910 novel *The Card* might also be what established this type of fiction (17). The origin story of football fiction is as unclear as the early origins of the game itself, which has been traced to a number of cultures.

[7] *The Boys of Highfield: or, the Hero of Chancery House* was republished in both 1908 and 1917.

Whether or not it is important to identify the founder of this type of fiction, literature about football has grown since any of those mentioned texts were published. In "Marking Out the Pitch: A Historiography and Taxonomy of Football Fiction," Lee McGowan elaborates on this aspect, "Yet with few notable exceptions, to football writers, critics and academics, [football fiction] has largely been invisible" (76). Nonetheless, it is important to highlight that sports fiction's development varies from country to country. For example, the USA is ahead of Britain in terms of how much critical attention it gives to sports literature. Andy Harvey notes that "[I]n Britain, the study of sports fiction, as a valid topic of either historical or literary academic discourse, is much less developed, though recently there have been some promising moves" (133). Additionally, Harvey highlights two main aspects that help such types of literature prosper in the USA, "[…] a well-established Sports Literature Association with its own journal, *Aethlon*, and a longstanding annual conference for the exchange and discussion of the place of fictional accounts in the study of sport" (133). This prompts questions about the lack of interest in this field of study in other parts of the world where football is popular, such as the UK.

In an attempt to answer this, McGowan offers Nick Hornby's opinion, "[…] there's enough excitement in the real thing for us never to have to worry about turning to a made-up story" (McGowan, "From Stadium to Page: Why Football Deserves More Fiction"). However, Cyprian Piskurek, in his book *Fictional Representations of English Football and Fan Cultures: Slum Sport, Slum People?*, ironically establishes that football fiction as a genre grew from the 1990s onwards after Nick Hornby's autobiographical publication *Fever Pitch* (1992) (84). This growth, according to McGowan, "reflects the changing culture around the game, the fans and the media, and offers a creative and imaginative space to understand and explore the sport's place in culture at a deeper level" (McGowan, "From Stadium to Page: Why Football Deserves More Fiction"). The explicit class structuring of British society also

might come into play here, with a knock-on effect on what is a fitting subject for fiction. Sports like football that were predominantly working class in their appeal tended not to be written about, either because there were not many working-class writers or because middle-class writers did not find it an apt subject. Hornby's book changed this, it looked at football from an alienated middle-class perspective. Critically, the key influence on his work was the American novelist Frederick Exley's *A Fan's Notes* (1968), which modelled how American writers have not been inhibited in choosing sports as their subject in the same way as English writers. This is not to imply that America is somehow classless, but rather that class does not manifest in attitudes to sport in the same way as in England.

As for the definition of football fiction, McGowan, in *Football in Fiction*, states, "A work of football fiction will be regarded as one that significantly relies on football as a central, pivotal or substantive element; this can and should include more than one of the following: narrative structure; narrative situation; point of view; voice; language use; setting; and character development" (5). In addition, Alexis Tadié gives the reader a glimpse into the possible categories of this type of literature: "The literature about football is a distinct field within sporting literature. It covers several genres, ranging from popular fiction for children to complex fictional constructions" (1175). Furthermore, in both *Football in Fiction* and "Marking out the Pitch: A Historiography and Taxonomy of Football Fiction," McGowan attempts to categorise and subcategorise the different types of football fiction. In addition, Alexander Jackson explains that this wide range of sub-genres was due to the increased number of publications in football fiction (102). But the question remains if women's football fiction corresponds to such categorisations, which corresponds to broader and more urgent questions about the sport. Looking at the taxonomies of the wider genre that is heavily centred around the men's game, a male protagonist, and with a male audience in mind,

women's football fiction should be understood in its own right, and its own unique context, dynamics, and development.

4.3 Women's Football within the Taxonomy of Football Fiction

To realise the disproportionately meagre presence of women's football fiction within a broader context of football fiction, it is important to look at Lee McGowan's categories of football fiction that feature male football players and mostly target a male readership. The first sub-category of football fiction is young adult literature, which is also a popular one in women's football fiction. McGowan describes the writings of young adult male football fiction as, "texts [that] tend to follow familiar lines, formulaic plots, inter-changeable characters and a climactic match as a finish" (McGowan, "Marking out the Pitch: A Historiography and Taxonomy of Football Fiction" 86). He also identifies young adult male football fiction novels as "the most popular" (86). To keep up with the changes of modernity, this type of literature necessarily evolved in its themes. Noticeably, he points out that class is of less concern now than it once was. McGowan explains that "as the contemporary forms experiences formidable growth and interest and reflect the much greater diversity in modern football, they are far less concerned with class, though aspects of community and good citizenship are demonstrated at every opportunity" (McGowan, *Football in Fiction* 83). More importantly, the characteristics of this type of fiction can be summarised as follows, a domain in which masculinity is never queried:

> Their casts of characters are often entirely male. Small degrees of variation on stereotyped plots and stock roles in easily relatable football story worlds dominate their construction. The setting might change dramatically […] However, the fundamental ways these texts present didactic moralised stories seldom change, yet it would be unfair to criticise them for their lack of evolution. The stable employment of the characteristics, tropes and uses of football across a range of narrative structures and devices have held the interest of young male readers across the genre's history. This fixed set of characteristics informs a number of areas of football fiction. Most effective in making extensive use of the schoolboy story formulation […], they come in two main forms: the comic book and the novel (McGowan, *Football in Fiction* 83).

In other words, these fictions keep things very simple, determinedly so. Professional footballer authorship emerged as another popular type of fiction as well, where established stars would either write (or have ghostwritten) books about ambitious young footballers on the way to professionalism (83). One of the most known examples would be the 20-book series (2015–2018) by the former English midfielder Frank Lampard (84).

The second most popular sub-category of football fiction, as identified by McGowan, is mainstream football fiction. McGowan highlights that this type of fiction is intended chiefly for male football audiences (McGowan, "Marking out the Pitch" 82). In *Football in Fiction*, he expands his explanation to include the characteristics of this type of fiction:

> In mainstream football fiction, the stories of players, managers or clubs exhibit the most common tropes of football fiction and tend toward the conventional and predictable […] mainstream football fiction novels address the needs of their target audience and rarely move outside the expectations of football fandom. Primary and secondary characters are men, most often footballers, and are, with few exceptions, presented in variably focalised-free, indirect discourse or limited third person from a range of distances [...] Mainstream football fiction is most heavily criticised for its 'low-brow' approach and a tendency to reinforce limited perspectives on the genre. They are likely responsible for its dismissal by theorists and critics (82).

Another type that McGowan highlights is crime-related football fiction, a type of fiction chiefly about crime but includes ample football content (McGowan, "Marking out the Pitch" 83). Hooligan literature is another related category of football fiction. In simple terms, it is fiction that portrays violence at football grounds and among supporters, as well as the clannish organisations that exist to foster it (83). Many football novels are inspired by such hooliganism, which is a part of football culture that became significantly evident in the 1970s and the 1990s. Significantly, however, the aftermath of the Hillsborough disaster saw the advent of the Premier League and all-seater stadiums. With that, hooligan culture went into retreat and the fictional representation of it settled into a form of nostalgia for the violent liberties which hooligans afforded themselves (McGowan, *Football in Fiction* 87). As for fantasy football fiction, it is the rarest variety of them all. Fictions in this category might

include unfamiliar characters such as “time travellers, monsters from hell and aliens from outer space” (McGowan, “Marking out the Pitch” 86). The impact of this fiction is negligible and can be regarded largely as a symptom of the popularity of sci-fi as a genre, with football is something of an adjunct.

More substantially, writers ponder football and its culture in the sub-genre of literary football fiction (McGowan, “Marking out the Pitch” 84). As for the characteristics of literary football fiction, “The texts collected in literary football fiction are characterised by the level of distinction in their presentation, the writing and treatment of their subject, the author’s standing and/or their demarcation by an expert such as awards won and other forms of acclaim” (McGowan, *Football in Fiction* 91). Sometimes the author might be a former player, or a journalist, as with Brian Glanville’s *Goalkeepers are Different* (1971), a novel that achieved a significant cross-sectional audience, published by the children’s publisher, Puffin, but appealing also to young adults and an adult readership. Arguably this book belongs to another of McGowan’s categories that is very similar to literary football fiction, namely smarter young adult football fiction: “[it] combine[s] an educated knowledge of the game with more involved themes, issues and character dilemmas and regularly merge[s] genres” (McGowan, “Marking out the Pitch” 87). It is important to note that McGowan’s work is significant as it is the only substantial work that categorises the emerging genre of football fiction. However, despite its broad scope, it is very limited compared to the male-centred fiction. This thesis not only contributes to this mapping of the genre, but it also highlights its limitations and the disproportionate emphasis on men’s football in comparison to other forms of fiction.

The origins of novels featuring a female football player as the main character can be traced back to the early 1920s, specifically between the years 1921 to 1923. However, as mentioned earlier, research on this topic is scarce, apart from Alethea Melling’s key article

titled, “Ray of the Rovers’: The Working-Class Heroine in Popular Football Fiction, 1915-1925”. These women’s football fictions from the early 1920s include *Nell O’ Newcastle* (1922) by Steve Nelson, *Bess of Blacktown* (1922) by Don Gray, *Ray of the Rovers* (1922) by C. Malcolm Hincks, *Meg Foster- Footballer*[8] (1921), *Captain Meg*[9] (1922), *Football Island*[10] (1922), and *The Football Factory* (1923) by Don Gray. Since McGowan’s book *Football in Fiction* (2019) where these categorisations appear, a new form of fiction featuring a female protagonist emerged. The publications that will be extensively explored in a later chapter, are fictions that could be categorised as historical football fiction, and young adult historical football fiction. All in all, the existing categories of women’s football fiction could be described as limited, historical and at its core political.

In particular, the stories from the early 1920s that appear in *The Football and Sports Library,* produced by the Amalgamated Press publishing house, arguably mark the foundation of women’s football fiction as a subcategory. Although the series *The Football and Sports Library* appears to be produced by and for “conservative advocates for clean living and non-radical support of the patriarchy” (McGowan, *Football in Fiction* 18), these fictions nevertheless address some ‘radical’ topics such as “dissent at work and sexual harassment” (Melling, “Ray of the Rovers” 103). Melling highlights this point when discussing consumerism and publishing ideologies. She suggests that there are two reasons why the Amalgamated Press has possibly turned a blind eye to the actual content of these publications: “The publisher [...] either missed the radical ideas introduced subtly in the football stories, or alternatively, chose to ignore them in favour of market forces” (103). In the case of the latter, the publisher’s aim is to meet public demand, adopting a profit-driven approach, so rather than aligning with prevailing societal norms, it ensures the consumers’

[8] Unknown author
[9] Unknown author
[10] Unknown author

preferences are what dictate market trends (103). This implies the emergence of a newly empowered kind of reader that might read about change and then demand it. On the other hand, this could also be a result of the distinct categories of literature that emerged for boys and girls during the late Victorian and Edwardian periods in England (Reynolds 92). Kimberley Reynolds highlights the gendered approach to this type of literature, where "boys were to be introduced to worldly matters in their fiction, whilst in the books they read, girls were to be protected from any shadow which might taint their purity" (92). However, girls had a strong preference for novels and adventure books intended for their brothers, which included examples of "lying, cheating, stealing and other vices from which girls were to be protected" (93). Though the material in these books was deemed entirely inappropriate for young female readers, it became apparent that there was a necessity and a market for this type of literature (93–94). There was an emerging taste for transgression.

The First World War was also a factor. During that time, Britain used propaganda on its own people (Trudi Tate 51), and this included introducing a specific type of protagonist into fiction. This type of propagandist writing glorified "the image of the brave, plucky factory girl, doing her fighting at home for the war effort, rather than on the front in the trenches. It glamorized the long hours and the poor conditions to nurture a feeling of solidarity with the forces" (Melling, "Ray of the Rovers" 102). The authors of those stories aim to introduce an alternate set of values without causing moral conflict for the reader. According to Melling, "propagandist writing never threatened the dominant ideology, nor did it subject the reader to severe role conflict that would prove uncomfortable" (102). The bold young female footballer may be legitimised by the figure of the "brave, plucky factory girl". Whatever the reason was behind the creation of the female football protagonist, the thesis further explores how she is represented at different points in history.

4.4 The Disappearance of Women's Football Fiction

These early works of women's football fiction have largely been forgotten, a phenomenon that can be attributed to various factors. To reiterate, the 1921 football ban is a crucial event in this context, marking a period when women's football began to wane, significantly impacting the visibility and relevance of the game. One could argue that this decline in the sport's visibility directly impacted the production and consumption of related fiction. Literature, including sports fiction, often reflects and responds to contemporary societal interests and issues. With women's football pushed to the margins of sports culture, stories centred on women's experiences in football possibly became less apparent and relevant to publishers and readers, who were more accustomed to the mainstream, male-dominated version of the sport. As a result, fiction that celebrated or even depicted women's football fell out of favour, contributing to the genre's neglect. In addition, the ban reinforced societal attitudes about how football was an "unsuitable" sport for women, diminishing the potential audience for narratives contradicting this view. As women's football struggled to maintain its place in the public consciousness, so did the stories that sought to capture its spirit and significance. This led to a period where such works were sidelined or forgotten, much like the women's game for decades following the ban. It was erased.

Another reason that could be seen to have caused such fiction to be forgotten is the authorship of the works. The ambiguity surrounding the writers of these works further complicates their legacy, with the possibility that a single author penned multiple works under different guises, as a result complicating individual recognition and historical traceability (Melling, "Ray of the Rovers" 104). In this regard, the author(s) of those works is/are influenced by 'Dialect Fiction' and its tradition of keeping the identity of its writers anonymous (104). Melling suggests, the author(s) of these works have clearly done their own research on the mill culture and the state of women workers (104), which could suggest that

the author of those stories might be a mill worker. But it is important to note that Alethea Melling's research was published in 1998, and later work done by David J. Williamson in his publication of *Bess of the Bees* was inspired by the original 1922 work by Don Gray, Williamson's research pins down the author Don Gray who authored both *Bess of Blacktown* (1922) and *The Football Factory* (1923). Williamson claims Don Gray is the pen name of Robert Murray Graydon (4) and his most notable success came from writing numerous popular titles in the Sexton Blake detective series, which remains the works most closely associated with his name (5). He died at the age of 47 in the year 1937 (5). In writing his fiction about women footballers as Don Gray, he took on a persona that was distinct from the one he used for writing his Sexton Blake stories. Nevertheless, it seems very significant that such an experienced and successful popular artist should have been drawn to the idea of women's football as subject.

Publishing houses play a crucial role in the sustenance and promotion of literary genres, and the decline in interest from publishers in women's football fiction, possibly due to a perceived misalignment with their values or a lack of profitability, likely contributed to the genre's decline. The stories were released over a three-year period starting in 1921 and the last of the stories was published in February 1923. Notably, 1922 marked the passing of Alfred Harmsworth, the influential founder of Amalgamated Press (Donovan 78). Following his death, the publishing house underwent a transition, ultimately being acquired by new owners. This change in ownership raises the possibility that this shift could have led to a divergence in editorial values and preferences. With their perspectives and objectives, the new owners might not have fully aligned with the visions and principles upheld by the original administration under Harmsworth. As a result, women's football fiction disappeared.

While these factors could be behind the neglect of early women's football fiction, those few stories serve as historical testimony and unequivocal proof that women's football

existed, and was popular, well before the first history book on women's football in Britain documented it. It is also worth mentioning that although this type of fiction vanished for decades, the broader genre, mainly the ones featuring male football protagonists, continued to grow as the popularity of men's football remained untouched by the constraints imposed on women's football. Unlike the men, the women had no official FA fields in which to prosper.

4.5 The Re-emergence of Women's Football Fiction

Nearly a century later, in 2019, a second 'wave' of publications about the period between the First World War and the ban came on the market, targeting a wider readership. There was also a confirmed representation of female authors, compared to the uncertainty over authorship that was manifest in the immediately post-war fictions. These historical novels, published mainly between 2019 and 2022, are mainly inspired by football teams and players that emerged during the First World War, such as the Dick, Kerr Ladies football club (from Preston, Lancashire) and its legendary players such as Lily Parr. The novels include *Our Beautiful Game* (2021) by Lou Kuenzler, *Lily the Rockets* by Rebecca Stevens, *Kicking Off: Dick, Kerr Girls* (2020) and *All Together Now: Dick, Kerr Girls* (2022) by Eve Ainsworth. Three other novels published within the same timeframe but that would be more suitable for an older reader are the novels *Violet's War* (2021) and *Vi for Victory* (2021) by Rosemary J. Kind, and *The Match: An Unsuitable Game* (2022) by Diana Townsend.

McGowan references in rather lurid terms two other emerging types of fiction that are not widely popular in Britain but gaining traction elsewhere, notably in the USA: lipstick-smeared scandal fiction and soccer mom fiction. McGowan describes the former as fiction "that ranges from pornography to football WAGs (Wives and Girlfriends) and 'widow' novels" (McGowan, "Marking out the Pitch" 85). Meanwhile, Soccer Mom fiction, inspired by the sport's popularity in the USA and its political canonization during the presidential run of Bill Clinton in 1996, typically features themes of family and community, often depicting

scenes of mothers picking up their children from soccer practice (85). Susan J. Carroll has argued that "the soccer mom news frame actually led to the disempowerment of most women through its narrow portrayal of women voters and their interests" (11). The figure of the "soccer mom" was anything but empowering.

The recent resurgence of literature focusing on women's football can be attributed not only to the increasing recognition and popularity of the sport itself, but also to the increasing number of publications and research exploring the historical aspects of women's football in Britain. The most significant contribution in the academy concerning the history of women's participation in football in Britain has been made in the past few years. Jean Williams, Steve Bolton, Tim Tate and Fiona Skillen are a few of many who look into how, when and why women's football peaked and declined in the past. In recent years, publications about the history of women's football in Britain have been significantly expanding. In 2021 and 2022 alone, at least seven books appeared that are wholly or partly dedicated to the history of women's football, including books that target young readers. [11] In addition, it is important to note that in the span of the years from 1994 to 2013, there have been more than a few books published about the history of women's football in the UK.[12]

Nevertheless, it is noticeable that the publications in 2023 marked a shift between writing about the past and documenting the present state of the women's game, and that focus

[11] The books include *The History of Women's Football* (2021) by Jean Williams, *Football's Forgotten Legends: The Dick, Kerr Ladies* (2021) by Gail J. Newsham*, The Strange Death of Women's Football in 1921: An Examination of the Most Momentous Year in the History of Women's Football in England* (2022) by R.S. Titford, *Football's Great War: Association Football on the English Home Front, 1914–1918* (2022) by Alexander Jackson, *'Unsuitable for Females': The Rise of the Lionesses and Women's Football in England* (2022) by Carrie Dunn, *A Woman's Game: The Rise, Fall, and Rise Again of Women's Football* (2022) by Suzanne Wrack, and *Arrival: How Scotland's Women Took Their Place on the World Stage and Inspired a Generation* (2022) by Steven Lawther. In addition, in 2020, Elizabeth Dale published *Trailblazer: Lily Parr, the Unstoppable Star of Women's Football.*

[12] *In A League Of Their Own! Dick, Kerr Ladies Football Club 1917-1965* (1994) by Gail J. Newsham*, A Game for Rough Girls?: A History of Women's Football in Britain* (2003) by Jean Williams, *The Dick Kerr's Ladies* (2004) by Barbara Jacobs*, A Beautiful Game: International Perspectives on Women's Football* (2007) by Jean Williams, *Girls with Balls: The Secret History of Women's Football* (2013) by Tim Tate.

in part had shifted due to the success stories associated with the English women's national team. The books, that are non-fiction, include: *The Homecoming: The Lionesses and Beyond* (2023) by Jane Purdon; *Lionesses: Gamechangers* (2023) by Abdullah Abdullah; *The Reign of the Lionesses: How European Glory Changed Women's Football in England* (2023) by Carrie Dunn; in addition to her other book, *Up: Pitches, Pay and Periods – the Progress and Potential of Women's Football* (2023). Therefore, one could argue that it is just a matter of time before we see how recent books and research will have any impact on future fictional writings on women's football.

To summarise, women's football fiction is evident in two periods of time and has few categorisations, those mainly depending on the age of the reader. It is important to note here that the readership is not assumed to be exclusive to a female readership. This thesis adds to McGowan's taxonomy by including historical women's football fiction that targets both adult and young adult readers. In contrast, fiction featuring men's football and players is wider in range of subject and genre. The consistency in both the presence and popularity of the men's game and the interest in publishing about it is a luxury that women's football and its fiction did not always have.

4.6 The Storyline

The historical novels *Our Beautiful Game* by Lou Kuenzler, *Lily and the Rockets* by Rebecca Stevens, and Eve Ainsworth's trilogy *Kicking Off: Dick, Kerr Girls; The Perfect Shot: Dick, Kerr Girls;* and *All Together Now: Dick, Kerr Girls,* all vividly reimagine a pivotal era in women's sports history. The novels are set in the early 20th century and depict a period when societal norms, especially regarding women's football, were being challenged. Each book brings to light the period's social, cultural, and political atmosphere, from the impact of World War I to the impact of evolving gender roles. They blend historical facts such as the rise of women's football and the subsequent societal pushback it endured,

representing it with fictional elements that bring depth and relatability to their characters. By focusing on their protagonists' struggles, triumphs, and resilience, these novels illuminate a significant yet lesser-known period in sports history and also reflect the genre's ability to provide a nuanced exploration of the past that resonates with contemporary readers. In doing so, they underscore historical fiction's unique capacity to educate and engage through the power of storytelling. Both *Our Beautiful Game* and *Lily and the Rockets* create compelling narratives around fictional teams and characters, while Ainsworth's trilogy weaves its story around a historical women's football team.

The novels tend to capture the complexities of women's football by focusing on young aspiring players' collective and individual experiences through the formation of characters' athletic identities. In the selected novels, the construction and development of the young female player can be seen through the progression of the plot. The stories are almost identical, the progress of events is predictable, and all follow a kind of five-act structure (exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution). First, in the exposition of each story, the reader is introduced to the main character, a female protagonist who is a young girl aspiring to play football from a working-class and low-income family, and the setting, which is usually an industrial city/town in England. In the rising action, the protagonist is working in a munition factory, supporting her family financially on the one hand and helping with the war efforts on the other. In the factory, she finds a space to play football. However, as events progress, the protagonists face different challenges and conflicts, mainly fighting societal constraints and patriarchal views that try to hold them back from playing football and reminding them of the 'limitations' of their gender. The conflicts are not always resolved, and in the plot's climax, the First World War ends, and the workers become redundant, which means they no longer play with a team or are hit by the 1921

English Football Association ban. Finally, in the resolution, the protagonists either try to fight back for a place on the pitch or give in to the new reality they face.

To add to Lee McGowan's taxonomy of women's football fiction, my research introduces two categories of twenty-first-century writing: historical adult women's football fiction and historical young adult women's football fiction. Fundamentally, it is fiction that engages necessarily with the war and its impact on labour, and to a degree beyond what happens in fiction about the men's game. There might be fictions about men's football that engage with the politics of war, but the scope of this research focuses on the women's game and how it expresses and experiences this conflict in a much more fundamental way. Looking at the plots of these novels about women's football, a pattern clearly emerges of football as both the experience and symbol of social conflict. The conflict is sometimes solved negatively (with most the protagonist having to give up playing), demonstrating the repressions that were visited upon women, or it is deferred, by not referring directly to the ban that history has in store.

Lily and the Rockets (2019) by Rebecca Stevens takes place in Woolwich, South-East London, during World War I. Lily Dodd, a fourteen-year-old, lands a job at Woolwich Arsenal, where she joins their football team as a goalkeeper. When the war ended and women were no longer needed in factories, Lily found herself watching from the sidelines. Besides seeing her dream of playing football shattering in front of her eyes, Lily experiences love and heartbreak that tests her friendship with her best friend, Amy. As the story progresses, she reconciles with her friend and finds new love. But playing football again remains unattainable despite her attempt to continue to play football by disguising herself as a boy, where she soon gets blackmailed by a teammate. The second novel from the 21st century selected fiction, *Our Beautiful Game* (2021) by Lou Kuenzler, is based on and inspired by Lily Parr. It revolves around a twelve-year-old female protagonist obsessed with football who would do

anything to kick a ball. Throughout the story, she goes through testing realities and gratifying triumphs, and her determination to play football puts her in a position where she challenges gender stereotypes and tests the limits of patriarchal ideology. As the story progresses, the growth in Polly's character is seen through her realisation of her sexuality as she "comes out" by the end of the novel.

The Eve Ainsworth trilogy tells the story of three siblings Hettie, Freddie, and Martha. The first book of the trilogy, *Kicking Off: Dick, Kerr Girls* (2020), centres around Hettie, who, at the beginning of the First World War, starts work at the local Dick, Kerr ammunition factory, where she finds a safe space to play football only for her football career to be cut short. In the second book, *The Perfect Shot: Dick, Kerr Girls* (2021), the focus turns to her brother, Freddie, a soldier who made it back alive from war, but who is left physically and emotionally scarred for life. Trying to recover and live with the burden of guilt on his shoulders, the Dick, Kerr team gives him the perfect distraction and a purpose in life again by appointing him as the team's photographer.[13] The final novel, *All Together Now: Dick, Kerr Girls* (2022), is centred around the youngest sister, Martha, who, like Hettie, makes it to the factory's team. But unlike Hettie, she has her father's blessing. The father's change of attitude reflects the progressiveness of the general attitude toward women's football. However, by the end of the story, Martha is facing a different challenge that her dad would not approve of.

The second group, historical adult women's football fiction, is similar to the first group, in that war and football are the central themes and suitable for an audience beyond their young adult years. The novels *Violet's War* (2021) and *Vi for Victory* (2021) by Rosemary J. Kind follow the story of the twenty-three-years-old Violet Dobson, whose roles as a wife, mother, and footballer define much of her journey. Concerned about her husband

[13] This novel is excluded from the analysis.

enlisting, Violet feels fulfilled doing her part by joining a munitions factory. Her connection to football begins when she steps in to play with her son, filling the gap left by her husband after he volunteered to join the army. This gradually develops, eventually leading her to coach and play for the factory's football team that raises money for the injured soldiers. In the second book, *Vi for Victory,* Violet's journey continues with different challenges. Her husband is back from war with a life-altering injury, and she has to find a way to cope with the new reality. *The Match: An Unsuitable Game* (2022) by Diana Townsend takes place during World War I, where the women of the Dick, Kerr Ladies football team, including best friends Florrie and Alice, form a team to raise money for an overwhelmed hospital treating wounded soldiers, despite facing resistance from their community. Inspired by true events, they persist with unexpected support, determined to help keep the medical services going.

In these twenty-first-century renditions of history, there is an inevitable emphasis on struggle, which cannot be avoided with the history of the women's game, as we have seen. At the same time, the fictions are positivistic in their tendencies, showing what can be done despite repression. The emphasis is on the footballer as a positive role model for female empowerment and agency, as well as putting an emphasis on the patriotism of the female players, reminding the reader that they were not just acting out of self-interest. Put more simply, they were playing for more than a love of the game. In this way, these narratives can be seen to correspond with the way in which twenty-first century women footballers carry a similar weight of expectation. Additionally, the women's game is used to promote socially progressive causes and diversity in ways that the men's game is not (or at least, not to the same degree). These fictions to a degree correspond to the idea that the woman footballer has to be selfless, and that football is only one of the many things they do. The woman footballer is cast as a multi-tasker. This also transfers to other sports and takes other forms as well. For example, the idea of "doing it all" that sometimes puts pressure on players where they decide

to continue to compete even if it is not the safest option to do so. A contemporary example could be seen in the American tennis player Serena Williams competing and winning the 2017 Australian Open while she was weeks pregnant with her first child (Corbett 133).

The historic stories of the early 1920s share similarities in the storyline with contemporary stories. Both are set during or around the time of the First World War, with the workplace playing a central role in the plot, and football being a prominent theme. In both eras, players face various challenges. However, there are also notable differences. What emerges in the plot lines of the early 1920s fiction is much more engrained and thorough in its sense of social conflict, and it is less easily resolved through insistence on patriotism or liberal attitudes. Fiction from the 1920s tends to be more diverse and less repetitive than contemporary stories. The 1920s stories often include a variety of subplots and themes beyond football, such as sexual harassment, abuse, and women's rights. Though this is very common, if not a characteristic in contemporary young adult fiction, the implied reader for the 1920s fiction leans more towards a more mature audience in terms of subject-matter. It is important to acknowledge here that it is hard to prove a particular readership. It does not seem to be one readership in mind, but the texts aim to build an understanding of the women's game. Additionally, romantic subplots and elements of crime fiction, such as stories involving murder and robbery, are more prevalent in the 1920s fiction. In contrast, contemporary stories often target young adult readers and may not delve as deeply into these mature and diverse themes.

Starting with the trilogy of Meg Foster, the first story of the series *Meg Foster-Footballer* (1921), opens with the protagonist's ambition to start a football team at her workplace, Blake's Mill. She eventually succeeds in doing so by convincing the mill owner, John Blake, to secure a pitch for the team so they can officially be part of the League. From the very beginning, Meg exemplifies leadership and tactfulness both on and off the pitch; she

does not take no for an answer, and in every conflict she faces, she ends up finding a solution, even if that means threatening the mill owner to go on strike when he suddenly changed his mind on allowing his employees play football. At the mill, Meg has not only faced challenges in relation to football but also when she bravely stood up for herself when another male employee at the mill, Ted Sefron, made sexual advances to her after she had rejected his advances. However, as the story progresses, so does the love story between her and Tony Letchworth, the nephew of John Blake. In the second story of the Meg Foster series, *Captain Meg!* (1922), the love story between Meg and Tony continues to grow and so do her battles to keep her team going. This time, she has to not only deal with the relatives of Mr. Blake, Paul Ruddock and Ida Ruddock, who are after Mr. Blake's wealth, but also with Mr. Ruddock's interference with the football at the mill. Meg helps Mr. Blake and saves him from the two greedy relatives. *Football Island* (1922) is the last of the adventures of Meg Foster's team, Blake's Crusaders, who are making their way to Australia in the hopes of winning the Truscott trophy, but get stranded on the Football Island. Their existence on the island becomes a battle between the men and women, both on and off the pitch, where Meg's team ends the adventure victorious. This fiction dares to project what would have been unthinkable, that a women's team would beat a male team.

Steve Nelson's *Nell O' Newcastle* (1922) tells the story of Nell Harmer, the rightful owner of Hood's Mill, who is deceitfully robbed of her inheritance by her uncle, John Hood. In her workplace, she faces physical abuse and sexual harassment, but it does not hold her back from taking a leading role at the mill. Nell channels her resilience into founding a football team at the mill that was later used to bring her uncle down. As the plot progresses, a romantic relationship between Nell and a competing mill owner develops, leading to a fairytale ending after Mr. Gray helps her to reclaim her rightful inheritance.

Ray of the Rovers (1922) by C. Malcolm Hincks is unique within the series, as it is the only story where the protagonist works in a department store, rather than a mill or factory. The story follows Ray, who takes a job at Bold Street Stores in Liverpool with the specific goal of joining the Rovers football team, a goal she successfully achieves. In an unexpected turn of events, Ray eventually becomes the owner of the store. Throughout the narrative, she challenges traditional gender roles, initially rejecting marriage to maintain her independence. However, by the end of the story, Ray falls in love and makes the bold move to pursue the relationship herself.

In *Bess of Blacktown* (1922), Don Gray's story follows Bessie Booth, founder and captain of the Busy Bees football team. After Peter Henneker, owner of a local mill, forces Bessie and her teammates to choose between football and their jobs at the mill, Bessie decides to leave, particularly after his inappropriate sexual advances. Determined to fight back, Bessie revives Brownell's mill, hoping to challenge Henneker's influence. However, Henneker retaliates by kidnapping Bessie, getting her arrested, starting a fire at Brownell's mill, and even replacing her football team with his own, falsely claiming it as his mill's team. Despite these adversities, Bessie, with the support of Dick Brownell, the rightful owner of the Bee-Hive Mill and her eventual love interest, overcomes Henneker's sabotage and brings him down. The last story of the early 1920s novels, *The Football Factory* (1923) by Don Gray, tells the story of Rose Mallory. After her uncle, David Farraday, suffers a stroke, Rose and her cousin are left to run the struggling football factory. To save the business, Rose comes up with the idea of creating a girls' football league, the Farraday's League, as she saw the business opportunity to advertise for their business through this league. Her business plan was a success.

Whether the novels are from the past or present, or told from a first-person point of view, where the protagonist is telling the story from their own subjective view of events, or a

third-person perspective that tells the story more objectively, the political context of the First World War and the social environment of the era are two important aspects to consider when reading or interpreting the texts, especially the analysis of their main characters. Such contexts contribute to the recurring themes found in the novels, such as power, control, patriarchy, and freedom, that manifest through different characters, institutions, and, most importantly, through the game of football.

4.7 Women's Football in Young Adult Fiction

When the 1920s fictions covered in this dissertation were written, the classification of readership did not operate in the same way that it does now in the twenty first century. In the earlier fictions, their readership was not narrowly defined, but might be seen as consisting of the same type of people that populate the stories; young women and men. Football fiction now often manifests in the area of young adult fiction, but that designation has acquired a very particular intellectual history. Sports fiction holds a unique place in the exploration of how young adult literature engages adolescent readers. In "Sports–related Young Adult Literature," Pamela S. Carroll and Steven B. Chandler provide an overview of what young adult literature generally offers and the role of sports in popular young adult novels. Young adult literature is commonly targeted toward adolescent readers, including those who are usually reluctant to read. For different reasons, they can relate to those stories as,

> The protagonists are themselves teens, often telling the story in first-person; the settings have contemporary or historical appeal; and, the themes and psychosocial issues interest teens today. In popular young adult novels, sport provides a backdrop for many "coming of age" stories" (35).

The transformative power of fiction in shaping perceptions and experiences of girls and young women in sports is a significant theme in contemporary young adult literature. Wendy J. Glenn argues that narratives, especially fiction, can alter how girls and young women are seen in sports. She argues that fictional representations can promote inclusivity and inspire greater engagement in sporting activities. According to Glenn, these stories are powerful and

can help readers, especially girls and young women, understand themselves and their role in their local communities and the larger world (924). In addition, such stories are particularly powerful when they serve as counter-narratives representing marginalised and silenced groups (924).

So, while narratives in sports literature can be seen as a way to empower young women by creating fictional spaces and characters that show their readers what redefining their roles in sports and society could look like, they also set the stage for broader examinations of power dynamics that these characters encounter: "young adult literature features main characters during their adolescent years who typically mature physically and emotionally over the course of the novel" (Kriegh and Kane 27). Therefore, the empowerment gained through sports fiction is not just about inclusivity; it also arguably equips young women with a form of resilience to understand how to navigate and challenge the multifaceted power structures they face. This thematic transition from individual empowerment to societal negotiation is explored further in Roberta Seelinger Trites' analysis of adolescent literature. According to Trites' book *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature*, in the course of adolescence it is essential for young adults to know when they are positioned in the power structure to negotiate those different forces (x). Therefore, throughout the novels, the reader witnesses the journey each protagonist undergoes where they face different authorities within their own household, factory, and society at large and learn how to deal with those powers in order to fight for a place for themselves on and off the football pitch. Accordingly, the female protagonist serves an essential purpose in adolescent literature, where she understands the operating powers in the text, and her character grows and evolves through those different encounters (x) Therefore, it is important to look at what such narratives are trying to communicate to young readers in terms of sports values, equality, fair play, and how they navigate institutional

powers. In addition, the young adult protagonists can be seen struggling in other aspects of their lives, not just their football pursuit. How they confront these challenges is as important as overcome them.

Wendy J. Glenn and Danielle King-Watkins discuss how "fiction has the potential to offer counter-narratives to belittling perspectives of female athletes by presenting empowered and empowering characters who might serve to inspire readers, particularly adolescent readers who are working actively to (re)define themselves and their place in their communities" (291). Mary Jo Kane argues that "literature is one of the primary means by which a culture transmits itself. Sports fiction written for a young adult audience can, for example, reveal a great deal about what cultural values are being transmitted to adolescent females regarding their sport involvement" (233). Therefore, it is important to note what is been communicated in those fictions, which also reveals the authors' role in shaping and reshaping ideas about women in sports.

Renee Steinberg is aware of the influence authors have over readers and calls for more sports literature that empowers and inspires girls far from the stereotypical such as female players trying to constantly prove themselves worthy of a chance in sports or a cheerleader chasing after the hero in the story (62). In her view, literature can be "an influence for change" (63). Therefore, representation matters, and featuring strong, talented characters capable of competing even against the opposite sex can be seen, as Kane describes it, as a form of resistance: "A young girl's efforts to compete against men, particularly in terms of sports such as football, can be seen as an extraordinary act of resistance" (243).

While some scholars and critics highlight the potential sports fiction has in terms of being a source of inspiration, some argue that these narratives often dovetail with commercial interests that capitalise on the girl-power movement. This point is raised in the article "I Am Not a Cow": Challenging Narratives of Empowerment in Teen Girls Sports Fiction" where

the authors argue that "teen girls sports fiction is part of a larger girl-power movement that has exploited narratives of empowerment for commercial purposes thus situating consuming the books themselves as acts of resistance" (Whiteside et al. 419–20). This view implies that the act of purchasing and engaging with these stories may itself be framed as a form of 'resistance,' albeit one that paradoxically supports the very market forces purportedly championing female empowerment. This dimension of "resistance" points to a more complex intersection between consumer culture and the empowerment narrative. On the one hand readers are supporting the ideas and values that aim to empower young readers, but it also loses part of its genuine intention as it is paired with a consumerism whose aim is always to profit despite the message.

In the end, the power of fictional narratives featuring female characters should not be underestimated: "Strong fictional sportswomen can encourage greater sports participation and adventuresome behaviour in young female readers" (Kriegh and Kane 30). Young adult sports fiction serves as a medium through which cultural values and perceptions about female sports participation are challenged and reinforced. What the novels have in common is the potential to entertain along with educating, empowering, and inspiring their readers. It provides a space where the reader recognises the challenges in sports for young girls and women and thinks of ways to negotiate and renegotiate their places within their communities and society.

4.8 Does Historical *Inaccuracy* Matter?

Historical fiction as a genre combines creativity and imagination with historical facts and research, offering readers a chance to explore the past and gain insights into the human

experience in different historical contexts.[14] Historical fiction enables authors to delve into the realm of possibilities while remaining rooted in some kind of historical reality while educating and entertaining readers. However, there are certain issues resulting from choosing the past as a setting for novels. Those issues are mainly related to time and distance between the past and present and the ramifications of it on formations of truth and perceptions:

> The balance that must be kept between the responsibility owed to historical truth and the need to write a story which in its emotional and narrative truths engages the modern reader [...] Then there is the whole area of shifting interpretations, differing ideological positions, that are both consciously and unconsciously taken up when we write about anything, but particularly about the past (Collins and Graham v).

But, in order to create this "balance," the changes that may occur in the retelling of the past could be seen as problematic as it could jeopardise the 'accuracy' and 'authenticity' of the representations found in the novels.

In addressing this challenge, Laura Saxton introduces, defines, and distinguishes between the key concepts 'of accuracy' and 'authenticity.' Accuracy, as she defines it, "is, to a degree, measurable because we can compare the details found in novels to details that have been uncovered by historical research" (128), and by using the methodological method suggested by Saxton, accuracy can be determined by comparing the fictional account to the historical findings (128). "[A]uthenticity, on the other hand, refers to an impression of accuracy and the extent to which readers believe that a representation captures the past" (127). Unlike accuracy, which solely depends on historical research, authenticity can be determined by other fictional and non-fictional depictions of a figure (131).

[14] Georg Lukács' understanding of the historical novel is based on the work of Sir Walter Scott (Groot 24). For Lukács the historical novel connects the reader with the past and raises awareness that historical events affect the present, consequently is highly important (27). Lukács also points out that the historical novel should create "a living empathy" that links readers to the past: "What matters therefore in the historical novel is not the retelling of great historical events, but the poetic awakening of the people who figured in those events. What matters is that we should re-experience the social and human motives which led men to think, feel and act just as they did in historical reality. And it is a law of literary portrayal which first appears paradoxical, but then quite obvious, that in order to bring out these social and human motives of behaviour, the outwardly insignificant events, the smaller (from without) relationships are better suited than the great monumental dramas of world history" (Lukács qtd. in de Groot 27).

James Smith Allen argues that "...the historical use of literature poses a methodological challenge" (239). He sees that "... nearly everything drawn from literature must be verified. In light of the deliberately fictional nature of the novel, unusual information found there must be compared with data from other sources" (239). While Richard Slotkin argues that "There is no reason why, in principle, a novel may not have a research basis as good or better than that of a scholarly history; and no reason why, in principle, a novelist's portrayal of a past may not be truer and more accurate than that produced by a scholarly historian" (222). Unlike historians, fiction writers are not bound to choose between knowledge and understanding (223); they have the freedom to combine the two and also be creative about it. Nevertheless, the term 'fiction' does give the author leeway to use their creativity and imagination for their own purposes, or as Christine Dugan puts it, "[in fiction] facts are often exaggerated or manipulated to suit an author's intent for the story" (5). This is key and an active consideration in reviewing how the figure of the woman footballer from the 1920s is shaped and then re-shaped by fiction writers seeking to offer differing visions of history and the historical in contemporary fiction.

Martin Johnes explores whether or not the novel could be a source for sports history using postmodernism as an approach. For Johnes, recognising the postmodern condition entails recognising that the historian's narrative is a subjective understanding of the past derived from sources that are also subjective in nature (Johnes 122). He argues, "truth in history is thus something unattainable. We can never say what happened, only what people said and thought happened" (122). Therefore, Johnes believes "recognizing the postmodern condition means recognizing that sources only tell us directly about sources" (123). Accordingly, "historians never really know, but they can infer" (129). Johnes concludes that although novels are not considered as reliable as other sources for factual historical research, they are valuable for conveying the overall mood and context of historical settings,"... in

conventional historical research, novels may not be deemed as reliable as other sources, but they are used to encapsulate and communicate the feel and atmosphere of a topic" (123). Therefore, "... novels help the process of understanding a topic and the ability to infer from other sources. But novels must be used in conjunction with other sources if the historian is to disentangle the real from the products of the novelist's imagination" (128). As the female footballer emerges as a product of World War One and set around the time of activism of women gaining more rights, reading the female footballer within this moment of history not only shapes the understanding of her depiction but informs it.

Katharine Harris argues that contemporary historical fiction deliberately challenges or reinterprets the notion of authenticity in portraying historical periods. She coined the term 'neo-historical' for a "new aesthetic" in historical fiction that combines "the new/ modern/neo and the old/past/historical" (193). Harris defines 'aesthetic' as "the set of images, ideas and themes through which past and present are made present within a cohesive narrative" (194). Harris argues the 'neo-historical' aesthetic is a reaction to postmodernism's changes in the understanding of history and narratives. Postmodernists believe "history is flawed because it must be accessed through narrative, and that narrative inevitably entails the occlusion and exclusion of certain stories and contexts" (193–94). On the other hand, the 'neo-historical' aesthetic interprets the "occlusion and exclusion" as:

> A consequence of decisions, conscious or unconscious, that are made in the construction of the narrative, and made as a consequence of the functional unknowability of the past in the present. The neo-historical aesthetic acknowledges the inevitable failure of narratives about the past but – in contrast to its postmodern predecessor, historiographic metafiction – simultaneously and contradictorily works to create coherent stories about it that recognise their own limitations even as they attempt to overcome them (194).

Harris also uses 'neo-historical fiction' as part of this aesthetic (194). One of the main features of the neo-historical, which has emerged in historical fiction in the last 20 years, is "the conspicuous use of anachronisms: language, politics and images that are manifestly the

product of the period in which the novels are written and not of the period in which they are set" (194).

One of the major concerns of neo-historical texts is not only the 'authenticity' of the texts but how the 'authentic' is defined:

> … neo-historical texts create new histories that are 'authentic' in that they recognise their own narratives as problematically constructed but continue to function as (fictionalised) narratives that have something to say about the past as well as the present. Authenticity here lies in not disguising the fallibility of narrative. By being explicit about the presence of the present, the neo-historical aesthetic enables the creation of a differently 'authentic' past" (194).

But perhaps the most balanced view of them all is the one provided by Jerome De Groot. He argues that both the historian and historical novelist have a role in bridging the gap between the past and present by making the past understandable yet authentically distinct from contemporary experiences,

> History is other, and the present familiar. The historian's job is often to explain the transition between these states. The historical novelist similarly explores the dissonance and displacement between then and now, making the past recognisable but simultaneously authentically unfamiliar (3).

Therefore, contemporary historical novels on women's football fiction are seldom regarded as equivalent to traditional historical accounts in terms of their factual accuracy. Instead, the emphasis should shift towards assessing how 'real' these representations are. In this context, 'real' encompasses "everything that can be truthfully said about its actuality plus everything that can be truthfully said about what it could possibly be" (White 147). This is arguably where historical fiction and history part ways, as the latter is more concerned with what is 'true' than what could be seen as 'real'. However, the 'accuracy' and/or 'authenticity' of the text/subject does not guarantee its truth. In the same context, Saxton argues that "[B]y separating 'authenticity' from 'accuracy' as distinct but interrelated categories, we can consider how literary techniques and historical research each contribute to painting a plausible representation" (Saxton 141). The image of the woman footballer from the 1920s is

authentic to its time period, and a more accurate representation in the context of the time it emerged, than the historic figure of the female footballer appearing in twenty-first-century fiction. Neo-historicism is evident in recreating and reimagining the female footballer. This is not simply about removing her from the past to fit the present, but about reimagining this protagonist with the burdens and struggles of history inscribed in her character. Filtering and adding to this figure is therefore a necessity, both to make her relevant to the twenty-first century reader and to generate sympathy for her past. This modern image of the female footballer is extensively explored in later chapters.

This chapter has shown a whole range of categories, and means of categorisation, yet all of these arguably (perhaps inevitably) offer only a practical understanding of the footballing woman, not least because she has to spend a lot of time resisting categorisation or learning how to live with it. When it comes to women's football fiction, specifically those within the historical fiction category, the development of the two literary elements, character and setting, is crucial for immersing readers in the specific historical context and evoking a genuine connection with the text and characters. This could be challenging to achieve as Harry Shaw highlights the responsibility of historical novelists to stay true to the era their characters belong to by bringing them closer to the reader without forcing them to fit present times (Shaw 25). Therefore, according to Shaw, "The task of the historical novelist is to render the unique 'atmosphere' of an age in the past, to 'recapture' the fleeting moment" (25). Janet Fisher also emphasises this stating, "The characterization must be deep and true, and the reader must be able to care about and identify with the main characters. After all, if they are to provide the necessary link between past and present, the reader must be able to share in their problems, their happiness and sadness" (XV). This depth in characterisation gives readers a chance to engage with the characters from a different era that is not just a backdrop but an active element that shapes the story's events and the characters' lives and

understand their experiences through impactful stories about women's football, which is not possible to gain from a solely historical mode of writing. The imaginative work of empathetic engagement is fundamental here, the ability to live with the life of another as vividly as you might do your own. In summary, in evaluating whether historical inaccuracy significantly impacts the effectiveness of historical fiction, particularly within the context of women's football fiction, it becomes evident that authenticity and creativity are paramount, often outweighing strict adherence to factual accuracy. Historical novels, particularly those exploring women's football, therefore provide a unique lens through which we can explore and understand the past, not merely as a chronicle of events but as a vivid, interpretive portrayal of historical experiences. The next two chapters will seek to communicate how this operates in practice with the fictions under scrutiny.

4.9 Conclusion

The chapter expanded on Lee McGowan's work by suggesting two more categories: historical adult women's football fiction and historical young adult women's football fiction. The chapter argued how real-life interest in the game and its history continues to be reflected in the growth of the fiction, and the history dictates the parameters of possibility. The chapter showed marginalisation in a sports context can be easily reflected in other areas that could mark the female footballer's absence. In addition, the fluctuation in the fiction could be attributed to many reasons, but I argued the English Football Association ban in 1921 restricted both female footballer's presence in physical and imaginative spaces, leading to her being sidelined on the pitch and in the fiction. Accuracy in the retellings of the past is not of the utmost importance; gender and popular culture providing an authentic sense of the time period situates the narratives in the context the reader needs. The next two chapters will look into and analyse the fiction from both the early 1920s and the twenty-first century.

5 Chapter Five: The Protagonist in Prose Fiction 1921-1923

"And why shouldn't we girls play football? [...] It's a clean, healthy sport, and there is no reason why the men should think that they're the only ones who can."
(Don Gray, *Bess of Blacktown* 7)

5.1 Introduction

Building on the historical context of women's football established in Chapter Three, and the range of ways Chapter Four allowed us to see how history and fiction in relationships of both tension and creative correspondence, this chapter analyses fictional portrayals of female footballers published between 1921 and 1923. The chapter, through a Foucauldian lens, highlights the power dynamics across texts and aims to explore the protagonists' portrayals through the foundational farmwork of spots feminism. The analysis utilises the work of Jennifer Hargreaves with focus on the texts' historical context, the players asserting their right to play, creating opportunity, and attempts to increase the game's visibility. It begins by exploring how World War One reshaped women's lives and helped spark the later resurgence of women's football in England. Within this context, the chapter focuses on stories of female protagonists – often working-class women who play the game, defying gender stereotypes, resisting systemic inequality, and strategically finding ways to navigate power dynamics. The protagonists are portrayed as determined and empowered, fighting not only for access to the game but also for fair treatment and improved conditions. They confront structural barriers, particularly patriarchal authority and financial control, that limit women's opportunities. In doing so, they offer visions of how these structures might be reformed or overturned. The chapter also looks into the role of class in the sporting experience of the protagonists.

This revolutionary drive is present in every novel but is especially clear in characters like Nell Harmer in *Nell O' Newcastle* (1922) by Steve Nelson, Bessie Booth in Don Gray's *Bess of Blacktown* (1922), and in the *Meg Foster* series: *Meg Foster – Footballer* (1921), *Captain Meg!* (1922), and *Football Island* (1922). These protagonists leverage their work

skills to pressure mill owners into keeping the game alive. Nell moves her team to another mill, Bessie reopens a closed mill to support her team, and Meg threatens to strike and quit, all in efforts to negotiate a space for women to play football. This space, however, is continuously under threat, as the lack of funding remains a key barrier to sustaining the game. This leads protagonist Bessie Booth to adopt entrepreneurial strategies of her own to promote the game through various means, using screens and billboards to advertise her team and fixtures. She has to be a propagandist as well in order to be a player. The recurring theme of cultivating visibility is even more evident in *Football Factory* by Don Gray, where Rose Mallory creates and sponsors a women's league to enhance both her uncle's business and the visibility of the sport. Players' performances also attract press coverage, which is crucial for increasing exposure. In *Football Island*, the author's decision to have Meg's team compete against a male football team could be perceived as an attempt to broaden readership, appealing to both male and female readers while drawing attention to the women's game. The chapter also explores how these stories frame football as a working-class pursuit, revealing how class impacts access to the sport. Characters such as Ray Lester in *Ray of the Rovers* (1922) and Rose also highlight how wealth could be strategically utilised to create the opportunity for women to play football. Those stories, individually and collectively, produce empowering and determined young women who are mainly concerned with defending their right to play football, advocating for equal opportunity, creating a space to play, and improving the condition of the game for women. Football is used by these writers as an instrument to politicise the female football protagonist, depicting her as a symbol of defiance and progress.

5.2 Michel Foucault: The Power Relations across the Texts

The portrayals of female football protagonists and the diverse roles they assume, whether in narratives from the early 1920s or more recent accounts, highlight the power structures at

play. The ways in which the writers through their protagonists' challenge or engage with these powers can be framed within a Foucauldian approach. These experiences of the female characters reflect the broader power dynamics that govern women's roles in society, highlighting how structures of control are mirrored in fiction and reality. Michel Foucault's concept of 'biopower' provides a framework for understanding these dynamics especially in light of the 1921 English Football Association ban, and the rationalisations that were proffered in support of it. According to Foucault, power is no longer in the form of a monarch or church (Danaher et al. 80) and thereby monopolised. Rather it takes the form of 'biopower' which could be defined as "technologies that were developed at the same time as, and out of, human sciences, and which were used for analysing, controlling, regulating and defining the human body and its behaviour" (Danaher et al. 64). In these narratives, 'biopower' is expressed through hierarchical relationships that both constrain and control the protagonists' actions. From fiction to fiction, these power dynamics manifest in terms of gender (man/woman), familial interrelationships (father/ daughter, mother/daughter, brother/sister, husband/wife), the workplace (employer/worker), and the football field (The English FA/the female player).

As those powers are "dispersed throughout society, in a multitude of micro-centres" (Gutting 87) and attempt to control female agency in different areas of their life, according to Foucault, it "never achieves what it set out, or claims, to do" (Danaher et al. 77). These powers are doomed to face resistance because if not, those power relations did not exist in the first place (Mills 40). The model that is present across the texts, with the exception of *The Football Factory* (1923), primarily resides in "forbidding" the protagonist from playing football and the protagonist fighting back to secure a place on the pitch. However, as female players persist in their efforts to play, there are ongoing attempts to control and 'discipline' their bodies. One way this discipline is enforced is through punishment (Danaher et al. 50).

In the fictional texts, punishment comes in different forms, sometimes in the form of physical force, or simply by denying the players a space to play. Yet the ultimate and most extreme punishment for women's football was the historic English Football Association ban imposed in 1921. Although, not always explicitly stated in most novels, its presence is deeply embedded in various forms, most notably through figures such as the male employer, boss, or a family member. The FA ban functioned as a disciplinary tool, where through the lawfare of the ban they dictated who could and could not participate in FA-sanctioned football. In doing so, it reduced active and ambitious women to what Foucault calls 'docile bodies,' where the English Football Association managed to control the game, and use their own means of doing so by controlling and limiting women's physical activity (Gutting 82). This is also an aspect noted by Jayne Caudwell, when she explains, "[...] football spaces are where power is materialised and where women's bodies are controlled and regulated. Football fields are places where processes of 'othering' occur" (Caudwell, "Femme-Fatale: Re-Thinking the Femme-Inine" 150–51). The notion of othering the women's game is the core and most dominant theme addressed across all selected prose fiction in Chapters Five and Six.

The Football Association and institutions like the church employed justifications to limit women's physical activity, for example utilising a bogus medical excuse that the game is "unsuitable" for women, therefore framing their actions as being in the public's best interest. As Paul Oliver explains, "A very significant feature of exercise of power is that those in a position of power and authority try to develop intellectual justification for exercising that power. [...] they will often, or even usually, try to persuade people that they are acting in the interests of the majority of citizens" (Oliver 45). But Foucault sees the problem not only in the decisions made by those powers, but how they become "accepted as valid" and "legitimate" by large numbers of people (Oliver 46–47). Though football did not disappear overnight for women, the fifty-year gap between announcing the ban and lifting it,

reveals a general acceptance of it. It could also, in a way, explain the near disappearance of female football narratives for almost a century.

Although tides of resistance did not stop to challenge the English FA's ban, for too long, this form of 'domination' maintained itself. In Foucault's view, despite the power of the dominating party on its subject, certain forms of freedom could slip in the process, which leads to resistance:

> The category of domination refers to relatively fixed systems of control, which strongly reduce the freedom of the subject, confining it to sedimented positions within a social structure. By contrast, the exercise of power presupposes a weakening of control, and the emergence of possibilities not evident in the existing structure of domination. This makes possible a certain degree of freedom for social agents both to maintain systems of domination and to propose counter strategies of resistance (Howarth 81).

It was not until 1971, as detailed in Chapter Three, that the tides of resistance that believed in their right to play succeeded in challenging the English FA's decision and later lifting the ban on women's football, allowing it to make a slow comeback after the fifty years of neglect. Again, as mentioned in the third chapter, women's football did not completely disappear, but with the lack of funds to sustain itself, and no official pitches or tournaments, it was bound to decline.

The fiction of the early 1920s, published between 1921 and 1923, is directly set in the moment where the English Football Association's ban on women's football was imminent. While the ban itself isn't explicitly mentioned in the texts, the FA's attitude is conveyed through various characters, both male and female, but particularly male characters in power. This attitude is evident in the restrictions and societal pressures that marginalise and contain female players, making its impact clearly felt. These limitations, which are physical, financial, and, most significantly, ideological, are central to the narratives, shaping the conflicts and influencing character development. The protagonists must navigate a space defined by power imbalances and institutional exclusion, and their responses to these barriers

reveal broader aspects of their resistance as they attempt to assert agency. To demonstrate this, the following section explores how the early 1920s fiction represents its female football protagonists. These stories portray strong, determined athletic figures who challenge and attempt to overcome gendered and structural barriers. Their strength has to be as thorough and resolute as the regime of discipline and punishment which seeks to contain them for what could be viewed as political reasons.

5.3 Struggle and Strength

Having established the nature of hierarchical relations that govern the texts, now the analysis turns to how these dynamics are presented in the text. The most crucial relationship of all is the one between the protagonist and their employer. The male employer figure in the fictions serves as a symbolic stand-in for the 1921 English FA ban. The authors' decision to politicise their protagonists could be seen as a protest against the English FA ban on women's football. As the characters fight, negotiate, and disobey systems that attempt to suppress their right to certain physical activities, they simultaneously protest the ban and strive to overturn it in all possible ways. The protagonists' actions follow the demands of sports feminism, as discussed in Chapter Two, which advocates for women's access to sports and the right to play (Hargreaves, *Sporting Females* 42). With more of the history of women's football in Britain known through the recent research on the topic, these novels are invaluable to the subject as they document this history without explicitly stating the ban, instead showing how and why it occurred and every step leading up to it. This supports Jennifer Hargreaves' core idea of sports feminism, which emphasises the importance of historical context in understanding the disadvantages faced by female athletes throughout time (*Sporting Females* 51). The authors of the novels humanise the historical struggle of the female footballer by bringing the female football character to life in accessible stories for readers. As mentioned earlier in this dissertation, the intended readership of this type of fiction is more an adult reader than young

adult readers due to the nature of the issues discussed in the novels that might be considered less suitable for younger readers, such as sexual harassment in the workplace.

Nell Harmer, Bessie Booth, and Meg Foster each face a conflict with their employer that is further complicated by unwanted sexual advances in the workplace. In the 1922 novel *Nell O' Newcastle,* Nell Harmer, the main character, is introduced as the founder and captain of the football team Girls' Eleven. The team is part of the Hood's Mill, owned by her step-uncle John Hood who makes it his life's mission to bring down this team. Throughout the novel, Nell tries to break free from John Hood's dominance and financial control while fighting for her team's survival. The question of whether or not women should be allowed to play football continues in the novel *Bess of Blacktown* by Don Gray. From the very beginning of the novel, Peter Henneker, the owner of Henneker's Mill, opposes the idea of women playing football, especially as his workers have formed their own team, Busy Bees. Similarly, John Blake, the owner of Blake's Mill, has the same issue with Meg Foster's football team, Blake's Crusaders Football Club, fearing it will distract his workers from being productive. In the majority of the texts, we find female protagonists attempting to navigate this type of conflict, further personal and social conflicts unfold, shaping the narrative. The fear of women's football can be seen as related to the threat of organised labour, or of any organisation that is not under the control of the employer.

In *Nell O' Newcastle*, and in the first non-league match played by the Girls' Eleven team vs. Gray's Engineering Works, John Hood, the mill owner, invaded the pitch and stopped the match, or what he calls "nonsense" (Nelson 5) Hood's attitude towards the game resonates with the English Football Association statement, "[...] the game of football is quite unsuitable for females and ought not to be encouraged" or in Mr. Hood's words, "Football is a rough and undesirable game even for men, in my opinion, and for girls–bah! It is ridiculous–unthinkable!" (5). Arguably, what made him really angry is the new form of

freedom or liberty that Nell has taken, reinforcing the limitations women had to abide by. However, Nell stood up for herself and the team: “The club is my pride, my one pleasure, and yet you would deprive me of it! Oh, it’s not fair—the world, the law’s not fair!” (5) Her response could be seen as a clear protest against the FA ban, or law, that does not want women to play football; but it can also be seen as a positive statement of both individual and collective sovereignty. The point is not just to claim the right to play football, but to dismiss Hood’s demand that he has the right to say whether the women can play or not.

John Hood did not consider it enough to scold the players but threatened to fire them from their jobs if they continued to play: “I say that this foolish club–this venture of yours which would make the firm a laughing-stock–has got to be disbanded, and I will be obeyed! Otherwise, any girl who has anything to do with it will be dismissed, you included!” (5) Hood’s financial control represents ultimate power over the girls and is definitely an aspect that Nell, and the others, had to take seriously, given the financial realities of their situation. It is made clear that Nell’s family have already experienced the negative influence of Hood’s financial power: “She was the sole support of her mother in those days. Since she had been old enough to earn a week’s wages in his foundry, John Hood had discontinued the allowance he had made Mrs. Harmer on her husband’s death” (5). In addition to her resistance to this economic intimidation, what is particularly striking here is that the disruption of the game and her encounter with her uncle, John Hood, was a moment of realisation of her rights, not only physically, but also in that she started to suspect the authenticity of her father’s will. She is no longer convinced her father left them nothing. It is not clear what sparked that suspicion at that specific moment, but it was the author’s choice to link the physical liberation to financial independence, and that was the beginning of the downfall of her uncle’s tyranny over the women of his family.

It is also important to note here that the extreme reaction of the mill owner comes after the continuous pressure from the foreman at the mill, Sam Lurgan, who promised revenge on Nell when she refused his advances. He insists football is what makes Nell "insensible" and seeks to destroy her team:

> "It's that plaguey football that's turning her head, though." The foreman mused.
> "That's what it is. If it wasn't for this darned club she's founded and is captaining, she'd be more about and presently pit the banns up."
> He laughed to himself again.
> "By goom! I'll soon settle that." He murmured, his eyes evil. "As soon as he returns to-day from his trip abroad. I'll make a report as will smash your club, Nell Harmer. As sure as my name's what it is!" (3).

As he physically pursues her, she tries to defend herself against his sexual harassment:

> "[...] Let me go! You are hurting me!"
> "Not yet!" he said, his other arm going about her slender shoulders. "Just as sure as I am going to kiss that pretty little mouth of yours now, so I am going to bring you to your senses, and one day make you mine."
> All the brute in the man was roused, and inspite of the girl's persistent struggles, and the contempt for him that was in her eyes, he forced her flushed face nearer and nearer to his own (2).

So, for Nell, it is not only her step-uncle that she has to battle to be set free, but she is forced to face other patronising characters such as Sam Lurgan who sexually harasses her in the workplace. These two male characters in the text assume that they have power over her, which becomes physical in several instances. The patriarchal control invested in the uncle, and the entitlement of Sam Lurgan, are seen as forces hostile to Nell. This shapes the narrative and tests the bounds of her character by forcing her to find ways to overcome their power. Although Nell protests against her uncle's actions and tries to free herself from Sam's advances, she finds herself in a vulnerable position. It becomes evident that her efforts alone are not enough, this is when Philip Gray, a wealthy mill owner, comes to her rescue. This may have been intended as a satisfying conclusion, but it leaves Nell at the mercy of the same structure of power as always. The kind Gray belongs to, is the same order of society as Hood and Lurgan.

His first intervention forces Sam Lurgan to let go of Nell Harmer, as Philip Gray threatens to resort to violence if Sam Lurgan does not leave Nell alone: “If I find you molesting this lady again, I’ll thrash you within an inch of your worthless life!” (3). The second time is when he tried to contain the situation that John Hood caused when invading the pitch: “Carry on with your match, lasses,” he said quietly. “I am Gray, of Gray’s Engineering Works, and there’s a job waiting for all or any of you who get sacked!” (5). Through those encounters the bond between Nell and Philip grows and evolves into a romantic relationship. This displeases her uncle, and tension between the two continues and reaches a peak when John Hood accuses Nell of being paid by Philip Gray to share inside information about the mill. This in turn leads to the turning point in the story where Hood physically attacks her and once again Nell has to stand up for herself, “Keep back! Don’t dare to touch me again uncle!” she cried warningly. “I will not submit to rough handling from you, or any other man [...]” (10). It is worth mentioning that in the story, Philip Gray is also seeking revenge from John Hood regarding the wrongdoing that he visited on his father. Later in the story, with the help of Philip, Nell proves that she has been indeed cheated out of her inheritance, and she is the rightful owner of Hood’s mill.

Although Nell does stand up for herself in times of conflict, it is noticeable that she is not capable of handling any of these conflicts without the assistance of Philip Gray. This consistent depiction of Philip as a saviour aligns with expected conventional gender roles, “where men were considered the protectors and women were those whom men were to protect. [This exemplifies] the active role for men versus the inactive role for women—females are the protected, not the protectors” (Kuhlman 33). Until the end of the story, Philip Gray maintains this protector status. He secures back Nell’s share that she was once robbed of by her uncle after her father’s death:

> [...] the necessary documents making Hood’s half-share of the works over to Gray had been signed. [...] What had once been known as the Hoods Works was now

> amalgamated with those of Philip Gray, forming one huge business, which was prospering mightily, and known under the style of "The Gray-Harmer Engineering Co., Ltd." (Nelson 64).

In Philip Gray's character, Nell found safety and, to some extent, freedom. Gray brings the happily-ever-after ending to Nell's "pride and joy", the Girls' Eleven football team. His role in the progression of the women's game is very crucial, as he establishes "The Newcastle Girls League" where Nell's team topped the table and were the first to win the £1,000 prize. In the text, Nell is a champion of women's physical rights and advocates for equal opportunities with their male counterparts, "Football for men is one of the finest sports our country boasts of, and girls have already proved they can play it, too!" (5). Nell also improves the game for women by making it semi-professional in an attempt to improve the financial situation of the girls, "[...] the girl had found it possible to place herself and her team-mates on a semi-professional basis, with a weekly salary of two pounds ten apiece" (48). In another attempt to make the women's game better, she also promotes fair play, asserts her belief in equal opportunity, and therefore refuses Gray's offer to finance the club: "[...] He wanted her to let him finance her club, knowing it would be her one joy and pride, but to this Nell would not agree. It would not be fair to other struggling clubs, she pointed out" (17). Nell understands the obstacles women face in playing the game and works to create better and fairer conditions for the players and the sport as a whole. This refusal of Gray's money represents the real breakthrough in terms of the novel's social mission. Money is how the masculine ownership class controls everything and everyone. By refusing its power, Nell asserts that there are more substantial and radical freedoms available if one is prepared to act on impulses that are alien to those which money cultivates. Nell's character presents football ideals that no longer exist today. In its modern state, both men's and women's football, success depends on financial power. Clubs with substantial economic advantage are able to acquire players, while smaller clubs struggle to compete or resist the financial pull of

wealthier clubs. In addition, issues like sports washing and money laundering contribute to the distortion of fair competition and undermine the integrity of the game.

The question of whether or not women should be allowed to play football is also explored in the novel *Bess of Blacktown* by Don Gray. From the very beginning of the novel the debate between Peter Henneker, the owner of Henneker's Mill where Bessie Booth, the main female character in the text works, and Ned Bromley, a head overlooker at the mill, reveals the owner's condescending attitude towards women in football. When Peter learns the mill workers have stayed late at the mill over a match, he immediately makes the decision to "forbid" Bessie and her fellow players from playing football: "[...]this has got to stop. You can just tell the girls from me that from this minute the use of that ground is forbidden!" (Gray, *Bess of Blacktown* 3). He denies the women the right of access to the field of play, using his ownership of property to administer the situation anticipating what would happen in actuality not long after, with the 1921 ban.

Henneker's attitude towards the mill's female players is evident in his remarks: "[...]those fools of girls are still trying to play football [...] I don't approve of the game for men, let alone for a pack of stupid, gawky girls!" (3). "Football! I don't approve of football—especially for girls [...] you ought to be ashamed of yourselves, making a public exhibition by kicking a muddy ball about—" (7). But he takes his threats a step further and escalates the punitive nature of his rhetoric: "[...] I forbid anyone in my employ to run a girls' football team!" (7). The language here once again mirrors that of the official FA ban, beginning to reveal a pattern of its influence across the narratives.

The texts also bring out the different perspectives on women in football, from other male characters. This brings us back to Hargreaves' notions in spots feminism, as presented in Chapter Two, where it is not only women who want discrimination against them in sports to be "eradicated" but also men (*Sporting Females* 41). The fictional texts reveal that

disagreement with the ban was not solely from women and this 'feminist' issue could use a male voice. In novel, Ned presents himself as the voice of reason and a strong believer in the right for women to play football. Ned protests at Mr. Henneker's decision and tries to sway his opinion: "Football's a great game, gaffer!" [...] An' why shouldn't the t' lassie play is as well as t' men? Britain ought to be danged proud o' oor sporting gals" (3). His acts are similar to Philip Gray in *Nell O' Newcastle*, which symbolises a broader protest against mill owners not allowing their female workers to play football. The only difference between Ned and Mr. Gray is the financial power and influence that Mr. Gray had that made it possible for the girls to continue to play football.

Bessie strongly stands up for her team and advocates for the team's right to play. Bessie is depicted as a character with a strong personality who would stand up for unfairness and anything that might hurt her football team even if that cost her, her job. In a manner that could be seen as a response or protest towards Mr. Henneker, and the English FA's claim that football is a game 'unsuitable' for women:

> "And why shouldn't we girls play football?" flashed Bessie indignantly. "It's a clean, healthy sport, and there is no reason why the men should think that they're the only ones who can–[...]No one was doing any harm, gaffer," said Bessie Booth clearly, stepping forward. "It was just an ordinary game of football–" (Gray, *Bess* 7).

Face to face with the mill owner, Bessie challenges his decision: ""Gaffer, you're not fair!" cried Bessie. "You can't–you can't prevent us!" declared Bessie"" (7). It becomes evident here that Bessie is not silenced by Mr. Henneker but rather prompted into protesting against his decisions.

Although Bessie was upset by the decision, she did not give up her hopes that the mill owner would change his mind about the football team and allow them to resume their activity, especially when he later asked to see her in his office (8). However, contrary to Bessie's expectations, Mr. Henneker took advantage of her need for the job and tried to

blackmail and harass her. Despite the intimidating situation she was in, Bessie was able to physically defend herself (unlike Nell, who couldn't do that alone):

> Bessie's heart was throbbing as though it would burst. Peter Henneker was right beside her now; one arm closed around her slender waist, and his flushed, sallow face was very close to her own.
> The next instant the mill-owner received the surprise of his life. A firm palm was planted beneath his chin, and at the same instant a deft back-heel threw him off his balance and sent him crashing into a far corner of the room (Gray, *Bess* 8).

Bessie's resistance took a physical dimension which is as significant as it implies; she cannot be physically contained by Henneker. However, Bessie kept this incident to herself and did not want to worry the others with what happened to her and decided to leave Peter Henneker's mill: "Why, I wouldn't stay and work for you for all the money in the world after this! [...] You despicable rotter!" (8). This remark also reveals her mental and psychological strength to deal with this trauma alone. It might be safe to say here that even if she wanted to reach out for help, the overall environment does not seem to have sided with her.

So instead of taking a passive role and staying at home, Bessie took it upon herself to save her football team, Busy Bees, by coming up with a bold plan to convince Mr. Brownell, a mill owner who was forced out of business due to Peter Henneker, to reopen the mill that he once had to close because of Henneker. This is where Bessie's astute understanding of politics, psychology and persuasion shines most. This is evident in her conversation with Mr. Brownell in an attempt to convince him to let her reopen his mill: "Why should [the mill] stand idle all this time, going to rack and ruin? [...] Let someone else open the mill, and beat Henneker at his own game!" She assures him she has what it takes to get the business up and running, including all the "skilled [workers,] engineers, mechanics, packers, despatchers, [and] overlookers" (12). Her proposal is on a profit-sharing basis rather than fixed wages: "We don't want big wages—we could run the mill on a profit-sharing basis" (12). Bessie's proposal is highly distinctive. This concept as defined in "The Theory of Profit-Sharing" by Franklin H. Giddings explains how profit is divided on profit-sharing basis, as it "divides

immediately upon its production and directly among the rightful beneficiaries, in proportion to their services, the value created by social growth and change" (Giddings 373). Bessie is proving her intellectual credentials here as someone adept at ideological, ethical and economical ideas of her time. Here, Bessie, while fighting for her football team's survival, is proposing the rational reorganisation of society, and the concept of profit-sharing also contains here an aspiration for gender equality.

This plan, that later in the text proves to be a success, asserts her role in the story as an independent figure not only financially but also in her thinking. Bessie Booth here presents a sophisticated analytical understanding of economics as a means of advancing a collective good. Her skills and financial knowledge put her in a position where she is less dependent on a male character when compared to the other protagonists such as Nell Harmer. Bessie's financial independence is established from the very beginning of the story: "Bessie was a deft, clever weaver, and earned good money" (Gray, *Bess* 7). In addition, the text puts equal emphasis on Bessie's business sense and skill in football, "[...] none could gainsay her business ability— that had made the Bee-Hive Mill what it was—or her undoubted skill on the football field" (22). Another incident in the narrative that presents her as an assertive leader because of her passion for football is when Dick Truman, the rightful owner of the Bee-Hive Mill, shows up and asks to speak to the "boss," "[...] if you don't mind, just tell the—er–boss that I would like to see him" (30–31). To his surprise, that role is occupied by Bessie, the one he is talking to: "I am the boss" [...] "I am in charge here" (30–31). Mr. Truman, who is technically now Bessie's boss, inquiries about her accession to this role and to his surprise again he couldn't believe it was through football: "Football! Why, how on earth—"(30–31). This interaction further positions her as a powerful protagonist with a strong sense of agency.

Bessie excels in a traditionally male-dominated field, and while her role in society could be seen as somewhat "radical," she is not viewed as stepping out of place. Instead, her community holds her in high regard. This is evident when she is arrested following Peter Henneker's accusation of trespassing. The public's outrage reveals the love and respect they have for her: "Bessie Booth was the most popular girl in all Blacktown—loved and respected by all" (Gray, *Bess* 49). Bess is imagined as a kind of popular public figure, someone with tremendous charisma and influence. As such, she is a potential figure of terror to the powers-that-be. Nell Harmer on the other hand, is less independent in resolving issues faced personally or in terms of football, she depended on Mr. Gray's interference. Both players, Bessie and Nell, go to great lengths to protect their teams. The image of the footballer they each contribute to is not a singular one; each has her own strengths and weaknesses, portraying a version of the female footballer that either resonates with her social context or stands out, but always in a way that remains acceptable within her society.

Meg Foster is unique among the protagonists of these fictions, as she features in a series of three novels: *Meg Foster—Footballer* (1921), *Captain Meg!* (1922), and *Football Island* (1922). Meg's story follows the familiar structure in previous novels *Nell O' Newcastle* and *Bess of Blacktown* where the protagonist is determined to play football, faces resistance, and finds a way to overcome the opposition. From the very beginning of the story, she is inspired by the example set by other women's teams that gives Meg the courage to form her own team to pursue her ambitions. Significantly, this takes on an international dimension, indicating that the cause of women's football was not an exclusively British one: "Since the visit of the French team of lady footballers to Preston, the idea of playing football herself had taken a very firm hold in Meg's mind. And now, it seemed was her great chance" (*Meg Foster—Footballer* 1). Meg goes on to form Blake's Crusaders Football Club at the mill she works at. Her team faces opposition from the start and John Blake, the mill owner,

voices his concern over the potential distractions that the team will represent: “It will interfere with the work [...] it will not be out of your minds. No, it’s no good, my lass! I cannot give my consent to this scheme, and I cannot let you have the ground. I shall probably put it to another use” (3). Not only is he talking about denying them the field of play, by now a familiar move, but he is also proposing to repurpose it so that even the possibility of playing will be eliminated. Meg, like the rest of the protagonists discussed so far, is a strong believer in girls’ right to play football and to be given the chance to do so:

> “It’s not fair!” Meg said passionately. “It’s not giving us the same opportunity that t’ men ‘a’. They’ve always been encouraged to run a team— everything has been put their way— an’ t’ only thing against this idea is that it’s new. It’s something out o’ t’ ordinary, and that’s why tha’rt down on it!” (3).

Although we see Meg in a position where she is an advocate of women’s right to play, she still needs a male voice to help make things happen, much like Nell. Tony Letchworth, the nephew of the mill owner, stands up for Meg and her team in the face of his uncle, showing resistance towards women in football could be sometimes generational rather than gendered. “Look here, uncle, why not give them a chance? If it doesn’t work— if later on you see any real objection to it— you can always make other arrangements” (3). However, as the plot progresses, it becomes evident that it is actually Meg that convinces Mr. Blake to let them play football after Ted succeeded in convincing him to not let them play: “[...] It’s bad for work [...] It’s bad in every way, and I’m going to have no more of it! If other mills like to encourage it, they may! But I’ll have no more of it here, and I’m going to stop it at once!” (9). “The grounds are mine, and I’ve a right to change my mind! There’ll be no more ladies’ football matches on my field in Turnbill Lane! [...] The football club has got to be disbanded at once! Those are orders I am just going to send out!” (9) Again, resonating with the English FA ban, the mill owner makes it clear once and for all that football is not to be played in his mill or any of his fields. Property ownership serves as the underlying source of the mill

owners' authority and their ability to impose bans. This, in turn, highlights the scarcity of publicly accessible land for recreational purposes.

When Meg comes up with a plan to threaten John Blake with a possible strike, football functions as an avenue to power for women. Bessie, uses her skill as leverage and knows that she has the power to disrupt the business:

> "I'm not one to make trouble if it can be helped, but if you go back on your word to us over this club of yours, there'll be trouble all right. I shall go out on strike, and I'll take a gradely crowd with me."
> "Don't talk madness!" said John Blake. "No union would support a strike on such petty grounds" (11).

In this instance, we have an example of the employer relying on trade unions to effectively share his point of view. This might be simply because he sees the matter as "petty" but might also suggest that he assumes the union might back him in his sexism. Meg voices faith in the political power of a strike, but it is not clear whether the "gradely crowd" she anticipates coming out with her involves the unionised part of the workforce. In many ways she presents her team as a kind of union in its own right, with all the agency that this suggests. Her plan is to put pressure on the mill owner by warning that if he breaks his promises, the team might go on strike and make him look bad in front of everyone in Lancashire:

> "T' league reckons you a sportsman, gaffer! There'll be a row if we drop out, and there'll be a lot of talk in the papers if Blake's Crusaders come out on strike because you've gone back on your word over the ground and the support you promised us. I don't say we'll win gaffer; I don't say we'll close down your mills: but I say we can make you the laughing-stock of Lancashire, and you know it! (10)

Here, Meg skilfully persuades the mill owner to accept her terms to ensure his reputation remains intact.

Through Meg's journey the story sheds light on issues like funding and control that continue to affect women's football today. Meg has to come up with ways to find funds for the team: "It had been decided to charge a three-penny admission fee, for Meg knew that it

would be necessary for them to have a bank balance. Some of the train journeys they would be called upon to take were quite long ones, and the club had got to pay its own expenses" (*Meg Foster—Footballer* 5). She also decided to start an advertising campaign, "With the coming of September the match was advertised all over the town" (5). But to keep the club going, it needed more than advertising, admission fees, and even Meg's negotiation skills; it still needed all the financial support it could get, and ultimately this meant having to find a benefactor. In many ways, this communicates a fundamental point about how the imagination of football appears to be inevitably structured around the idea of money. This is when Tony Letchworth invests in the club: "Tony Letchworth, he had done the thing properly; he had not only bought the ground as he had promised, but had had the stands repaired and painted, extra gates and turnstiles fitted, and the dressing-rooms were large fitted in the most up-to-date manner" (*Captain Meg!* 1). The club also got a well-furnished office for the management team: "[...] having a little office [...] fitted with a telephone and quite nicely furnished" (2). This makes it clear that for the game to sustain itself, it needs adequate funding and the lack of it threatens the existence of the game. In the structures of modernity, the game is not just a game, it also has to function as a business.

The lack of financial support in the women's game is further explored in the second novel of Meg's trilogy, *Captain Meg!* Sir John, a wealthy Scottish man and owner of several mills, in his encounter with Meg and her teammate, discusses the matter of workers' freedoms versus the control held by mill owners through their ability to withdraw support, whether financial, logistical, or otherwise, which could ultimately jeopardise the future of the game: "I quite agree that we have no right to dictate as to what you do in your own time, but we have the right to withdraw our support" (18). In response, Meg's friend highlights the wider impact of that decision, exposing the underlying intention which could be seen as far from innocent: "There's at least half a dozen struggling teams connected-with your mills in

the league. Without your support they'd have to go out, and that would be the beginning of the smash up of the league" (18). Arguably, this seems to have been the plan all along and served as a strategic attempt to pressure them into giving in and abandoning the game. The fictional staging of this debate is highly significant and makes clear the unique set of problems that faced women footballers. Their game is always represented as existing in a state of precarity, relying on the tolerance of a society that is mostly determined to be intolerant. In some respects, then, these fictions trade on an old trope of imperilled femininity in need of help, but the key difference is that the women are not passive, but engaged, alert and clear-eyed about what threatens their freedom to play. A bitter historical irony surrounds the fictions from this time. The imagined threat to their freedom was about to become real in 1921.

In the same novel, there was a second attempt to stop women from playing at the mill, this time from Paul Ruddock, the new manager, who sent out a note forbidding training on the basis that it took time and space which effectively belonged to the workplace: "Football practice, having interfered with work of the mills, will in future be cancelled. Any worker leaving early without written permission from me will be liable to instant dismissal. "PAUL RUDDOCK (*Manager*)"" (*Captain Meg!* 50). The repression here takes another subtle form, in that the playing of the game is referred to as a kind of industrial sabotage, even though Mr. Blake, the mill owner, had already given his permission. Meg's response was extreme, and again takes the form of a challenge to the manager's authority by stressing the collective agency of the women. Being in the team has given them another form of collective confidence: "Then you can make out the notices of every girl in Blake's Crusaders!" she cried. "For we're all quitting the mill at four o'clock, as arranged!" (50). She is confident the plan will work, knowing as a fact how irreplaceable skilled workers are during this crucial moment in England.

To resolve the conflict with Meg Foster and her employer, Meg threatens this time not to strike, but to stage a walkout. In the context of the novel, the walk out is more disruptive to the business. Once again, Meg's awareness of labour politics sets her apart from the other football protagonists of her time. In the broader context of WWI Britain, where skilled labour was scarce, the loss of even a single skilled worker could significantly impact productivity and profit. Meg recognises this and uses it as leverage. Therefore, she employs the threat of industrial action as a way to secure her and her team's rights, in response firstly to Blake, and then to Ruddock. Both backed down from their attempts to prohibit the women out of fear they will lose any of their workforce. Yet again, this is indicative of what would become a problem, and which led to the ban becoming an actuality. The return of the male workforce after the end of the war in effect took away much of this bargaining power. Nevertheless, these actions highlight Meg's negotiation skills, and the broader power of the working class to disrupt business in pursuit of their rights and interests. These fictional accounts demonstrate that women were consistently prepared and organised at a local level to respond to social conditions and create opportunities to play football. The primary barrier to their participation was not a lack of initiative or ability, but rather institutional opposition not from the FA itself but from the mill owners who share the same class interests.

Beyond this labour struggle, the story also sheds light on critical issues in women's sports, particularly football. Being allowed to play required careful negotiation and arrangement, as financial support was both essential and intentionally restricted. The lack of funding was a strategic move by mill owners to undermine women's teams, hoping they would collapse without resources. In response, Meg Foster is forced to find creative ways to sustain the team and generate income. This reveals a larger pattern of systemic efforts to limit women's participation in sports by withholding the financial support necessary for their survival and success. As Meg Foster is trying to figure out ways and strategies to overcome

the barriers for her and her team to continue to play football at their workplace, just like Bessie Booth and Nell Harmer, Meg also experiences unwanted advances from a male worker. Ted Sefton tries to make a move on Meg as, "He put his arm about her, and bending his head, attempted to snatch a kiss" (*Meg Foster—Footballer* 2). But Meg's response came in full force: "Meg had not been in training for nothing. A quick twist, and she was free: her arm swept round, and Ted went staggering from a hearty box of the ear!" (2) "His face became really evil then. "Tha little hussy!" he hissed. "I'll mak' thee pay for that!" (2). There is a typical irony here in him calling her a "hussy" when it is he who has committed the act of sexual assault. In swiftly reacting to his advances Meg exemplifies physical and mental strength when standing up for herself:

> Meg laughed.
> "I'm not afraid o' thee." she said. "And tha can't sack me from t'mill.
> Tha asked for it—and got it! No man kisses me against my will!" she ran off then. But for some moments he stood there, staring after her (2).

This recurrent concern with sexual harassment in the texts is discussed by Alethea Melling, as this also happens to Ray Lester in *Ray of the Rovers*, which means four out of the five protagonists experienced sexual harassment at some point at their workplace. Melling refers to Jan Lambertz's study on the matter, specifically sexual harassment in the cotton textile industry, where she states that "harassment was almost a tradition" (Melling, "Ray of the Rovers" 112). The fictions cumulatively highlight it as a persistent issue.

In the novels *Nell O' Newcastle, Bess of Blacktown*, *Meg Foster—Footballer*, and *Captain Meg!*, the protagonists face not only the patriarchal attitudes of their employers regarding their involvement in football, but also unwanted sexual advances from male characters. The characters respond to these challenges in different ways, with some demonstrating greater independence and both mental and physical strength. However, in the end, each of the protagonists thus far has had to deal with labour and economics differently in their pursuit to keep the ball rolling and refusing to give in. By moving to another mill and

taking the human resources needed to reopen Mr. Brownell's mill, Bessie Booth proves to be radical in her approach to resolving the conflict between her and Henneker. Nell Harmer, on the other hand, does not exhibit the same level of independence as Bessie and has a more tame than radical approach in handling conflict. Nell needed a male voice to lend her help with her team and face her uncle's financial and physical abuse. As for Meg Foster, her negotiation skills are borderline manipulative in her approach to resolving conflict. Taken collectively, the depictions in the novels so far reveal the, the protagonist was a footballer, a labour rights activist, an entrepreneur, a propagandist, a negotiator, legally knowledgeable, and internationally aware. She was political.

5.5 Space and Visibility

The protagonists so far have been framed within a context where they are trying to secure a space to play football. Visibility is not something the protagonists simply demand but actively pursue. The protagonists are aware of how essential visibility is for women's football for generating publicity and the financial support necessary for the sport's long-term sustainability. In *The Football Factory* (1923) by Don Gray, the final novel in the series, nineteen-year-old Rose Mallory takes on a key role in the football manufacturing industry. Often overlooked in favour of her cousin Olive Dene, Rose is forced to act when her uncle, factory owner David Farraday, falls ill. In his absence, he presents a challenge to both nieces: the one who succeeds in saving the struggling business, especially from the threat posed by the competitor Bramshot's Factory, will receive a two-thirds share of it while the other will receive one-third (55). This key event in the fiction where the uncle plans on giving up his own ownership and invites the women to take over that role, could be seen as progressive but it is also because he does not have children of his own to leave the factory to. What makes this novel unique is, firstly, that the protagonist plays football but also holds significant

influence within the sport; and secondly, that it presents the women's game without resistance or conflict. A dreamlike fiction.

Driven by strategic thinking and an understanding of market trends, Rose knows precisely how to keep the business alive. She shares her plan with her cousin Olive Dene, insisting that advertising is the potential solution: "Advertise. No one can expect to do business without advertising these days," even though their uncle had always resisted the idea, as Olive points out (55). What is equally impressive is Rose's understanding of the market, and her ability to identify a business opportunity to revive her uncle's struggling football factory. Though the novel was published in 1923, nearly two years after the official ban by the English FA took place, the founding of the league should not be read as a response to the ban but rather marking the early days of recognising the existence and growth in women's football. The novel does not in any way hint that football for girls existed before, rather on the contrary. This is evident when Rose was talking to Olive about her idea of the women's league:

> "You read the papers—you must realise what a tremendous boom there is in football."
> "Of course there is!" snapped her cousin "There always has been!"
> Rose: "I mean, football for girls" (55).

She identifies untapped potential when she recognises the growing interest among women in playing football: "Teams of girl footballers are springing up all over the country, especially in this district. And they are forced to play friendly matches with each other, because no one has founded a league to cater for them. I propose we found a league" (55). The novel draws attention to the boom in women's football and spotting a business opportunity in that and creating a league. She justifies the foundation of the league as a financially-efficient type of advertising: "It won't cost us much money" (55). The novel therefore introduces the concept of sponsorship in women's football, highlighting the growing relationship between the sport

and commercial interests, and prophesying how enmeshed the sport would become with the language and culture of finance.

Rose devises a plan to launch a new league, which she names “Farraday’s League”, in which her factory will play a central role. As she explains, “[...] Put up a silver challenge cup and medal for competition. And we’ll enter a club of our own, formed of girls working in our own factory” (55). By establishing the league, she not only increases the visibility of the game but also creates the structure and avenue for it to prosper. This sponsorship goes beyond organising matches; it becomes a marketing strategy, and it also suggests that the future of the game might lie in such strategy: a highly pragmatic, and familiarly cynical, analysis. She further states, “And, what’s more, every club competing in the league will play with Farraday’s footballs only, and we will keep them supplied free of charge. It will be a splendid advertisement, Olive” (55). In this way, the league becomes a platform for brand visibility, turning football into a vehicle for commercial gain and reflecting the capitalist forces that increasingly influence the sport. She also used the local and county newspaper to get the word out there, which gives the women’s game exposure and works as publicity for the factory: “I’ll get out an advertisement this afternoon, Oliver” she said, “and we’ll have it inserted in all the local and county newspapers” (55). Rose takes the ‘modern’ route to revive her uncle’s business, through advertising, which further emphasises her ability to understand and navigate modernity.

This fictional account offers a different view of football, one based on strategy, business sense, and entrepreneurial leadership. Rose’s actions are clearly profit-driven and are organised around the intention to promote her factory. At the same time, Rose is trying to generate interest and draw attention to the women’s game. If her plan is motivated by personal gain, it can also be viewed as promoting a form of social responsibility. She represents entrepreneurship, in truth. The Football Woman is also sometimes a

businesswoman, but one who sees how profit might be evident in social as well as financial terms. Regardless of her true intentions, she created a space for women to play football, saved the factory from bankruptcy, and faced no backlash for supporting women in the sport, which is the most remarkable thing of all, compared to the other fictions. The idea of creating a league for young women met with no opposition and received favourable media coverage as the *Birminton Sports Argus* reported:

> We heartily compliment the firm of Farraday upon their enterprise in forming a girls' football league, and thus catering for the many girls' football clubs that have sprung up during the last year or so. The league has been organised in a thoroughly business-like manner that does credit to the promoters, and it is comprised of strong clubs, who will fight it out between them for the honour of carrying off the handsome cup and medals that Farradys has put up for competition (Don Gray, *The Football Factory* 59).

Mr. Farraday was thrilled with the idea of the league when he read about it in the *Birminton Sports Argus*, which emerges in the following exchange with Olive Dene his favourite niece:

> "[Uncle] do you approve?"
> "Approve! I should think I do!" jerked the old man emphatically. "It's cheap and effectual means of bringing our name before the public. Farraday's Football League—Farraday's Famous Footballs! The two are synonymous! Splendid!" (59)

The novel clearly shows how football and capitalism are becoming closely connected. Here capitalism is described as covering over difference and resolving conflict, whereas in the other fictions it is the source of conflict. When Olive asked her uncle, "Do you approve?," arguably she was anticipating rejection as this is happening at a time women playing football is frowned upon. But the only factor that is new here, and different from all of the other stories discussed in this chapter, and even the ones that will be discussed in the chapter that follows, is that Mr. Farraday will make money out of the scheme Rose created with minimum cost. So, women playing football and exposing their body in a rough dangerous game is not a significant factor for Mr. Farraday when it generates revenue; it is not only 'allowed' but encouraged. The novel, particularly with the protagonist not having to fight patriarchal

attitudes, any sexual harassment, or navigate powers to establish a women's league, creates a utopian football land: *The Football Factory* stands out as a fantasy.

It is also important to point out that this is not the only text where practical steps were taken to generate more visibility for the women's game. Meg Foster, in the first of the series, *Meg Foster—Footballer*, tries to come up with ways for her team to financially support and sustain itself. For that reason, Meg used advertising on cinema screens to promote her team and the fixtures, taking advantage of what modernity had to offer: "With the coming of September the match was advertised all over the town; Meg even went to the expense of getting it thrown on the screens at the cinemas" (*Meg Foster—Footballer* 5). Another evident form of visibility that the women's game generated in the novels is through the achievement of useful press coverage. For example, in *Nell O' Newcastle,* and despite the dramatic events of hooliganism and John Hood's attempt at disruption, Nell's team was victorious 3-0, with her performance taking the spotlight. Nell Harmer received good press as she, in today's terms, was the player of the match. In the match she scored two of the goals and her performance was described in the text as, "[...]brilliant, magnificent. She was flinging herself heart and soul into the game" (Nelson 7). She also received praise in the *Chronicle* where her unmissable performance had to be documented "so that those who had not actually seen the game read of Nell's brilliant play" (7). The media reportage has the effect of communicating the quality of Nell's play, how others might hear of it, and how her reputation might be built. In this way, the woman footballer becomes a person with a mythic capacity beyond their physical incarnation.

Another way the women's game gained attention is evident in the third novel of the Meg Foster series, *Football Island*, where the author arguably makes a strategic choice by alluding to a well-known all male team from England; Corinthian F.C, an amateur club celebrated for their ethos of fair play and of touring the world to propagate the idea of

football as an international sport. If any male team could be imagined playing against a woman's team, it would be the Corinthians, as it would hopefully correspond with their mission of diversification. As established in Chapter Four, this novel, similar to the other novels published within the same series, feature female football protagonists, and are aimed at a female readership, but creating a team that resembles the famous Corinthian FC, suggests a deliberate effort to broaden the novel's appeal to include male readers. Published in 1922, following the 1921 FA ban on women's football, the novel criticises the reasoning used by the FA, such as it is a rough game for men, and sheds light on the exclusion of women in decision-making.

While travelling to Australia in hopes of winning the Truscott Trophy, Meg's team, Blake's Crusaders, meets another football team, Scardale Corinthians, "London's pet amateur team" (*Football Island* 5) a men's football club that is also travelling to compete for the Truscott Trophy. The competition is designed to stage a final confrontation between men and women. Scarsdale Corinthians were going to compete in the men's competition and Blake's Crusaders in the ladies' competition, and the winner of each category would play in the final (3). But both teams become stranded on an island that is referred to in the novel as 'Football Island' after a storm hits the ship (6). Their time on the island turns into a symbolic and literal battle between men and women, both on and off the pitch. At first, a match was proposed between the Crusaders and Corinthians and both teams were in support of the idea: "Of course the Crusaders and Corinthians had jumped at the idea, and so on the next day, which happened to be a Saturday, the day which seemed so natural for football, the big match between the rival teams was to be played" (11). The Scarsdale Corinthians are mostly referred to throughout the novel as the Corinthians. The choice to place a women's team against a fictional male team that is suggestive of the historically significant Corinthians, emphasises the ambition behind the novel's portrayal of women in football. Arguably, it

could also be seen as a political choice aiming to promote social change. The Corinthians, as noted by Chris Bolsmann and Dilwyn Porter, "had a global reputation as a touring club" and were "widely regarded as the principal standard-bearer for amateurism at a time when English football was increasingly defined by the professional game" (552). Furthermore, for the majority of its history, they avoided competitive leagues like the Football League and FA Cup to maintain their amateur status (552), which suggests that this was not an innocent narrative choice. By drawing on associations with a team so central to British football's identity, the author may be using them to critique the ban on women's football and to reach a broader audience, particularly readers who might be initially uninterested in women's football; suggesting that women's football should be amateur and non-competitive

The first encounter between the two teams, the ladies' won (*Football Island* 4) but as their time on the island does not seem to be short, a football league was formed at a men-only meeting where Meg and her team were not invited and were not therefore involved in decision making: "Meeting engineered by Roland Marks—a meeting which had the support of Cornelius Hugon, the millionaire, who, for some reason, seemed to have come to the conclusion that he was going to be the big power in the game as played in this uncharted island in the Pacific" (14). The meeting, in some ways, echoes the English FA, where men, money, and power come together and decide on the fate of football and in this case a critique to excluding women while deciding on their fate in football. This is a demand of sports feminists where they call for "an equivalent voice with men in decision-making" (Hargreaves, *Sporting Females* 42)

Through their time on the island, Meg's team faced other men's teams such as, "the Bluebird", the natives of the Island. The novel points to the differences between men and women as a potential advantage to the men's side, "[...] The superior stamina of the men was telling in their favour" (22). However, that was not the case for Meg and her team, "Blake

Crusaders had not only maintained their record of being undefeated, but had beaten the champions of the other town on Football Island" (23). In addition, the final game took place between Blake Crusaders and Robins where the Robins' were known for their rough play.[15] In an earlier match when the Robins played another men's team, the other team explained the book of laws to them, saying "rough play is not allowed" (*Football Island* 16). This also imprints the idea that football is a rough game. But for the women's team to beat the roughest of all teams is telling of how women's football is perceived as a threat and speaks of the desire to terminate it. The threat men felt from the women was such that, fearing a loss, they took the extreme measure of attempting to dope the women's team using a "dangerous little yellow flower" (53). Meg's team realised the planned subterfuge and played along, allowing the men to think that they succeeded in their plot. To the surprise of the men, the Crusaders won 5-2 (54). The messages in the novel are clear: it is a men's game, a rough game, men are stronger, yet women can skilfully play and win.

So, through Rose Mallory's efforts to organise a women's league and revive her uncle's business, the narrative highlights women's leadership in both sport and enterprise. Moreover, visibility is amplified through advertising campaigns and favourable media coverage, as seen with Meg Foster and Nell Harmer. Furthermore, an allusion to a historically significant male team in *Football Island* arguably introduces the women's game to a wider audience, helping to broaden the novel's appeal and direct attention to the women's game. This representation, whether perceived as realistic or not, reveals an empowering image of female footballers who cannot be defeated by any male team, no matter how strong or rough they are.

[15] Although this text, *Football Island*, is fictional and the clubs are presented as such, the nickname 'The Robins' has historically been used for real clubs in Britian, including Bristol City, Cheltenham, and Swindon (Baverstock 89).

5.6 Class, Football, and Fiction

The 1920s fiction tries to position women's football within a category of its own. The novels position women's football as sport for the working class, as a direct result of World War One. In this chapter, the fiction reveals that access to sport is gendered and "meditated" by class (Hargreaves, *Sporting Females* 51), a topic that is further discussed in Chapter Six. In "Cultural Differentiation, Shared Aspiration: The Entente Cordiale of International Ladies' Football, 1920-45," Alethea Melling points outs, "Women's sport of any description was the preserve of the educated middle class. However, this was to change with the onset of the First World War" (29). A common thread running through these novels is that the female protagonists are workers who play football, which by default frames the sport as a working-class activity. There are exceptions, however: in the case of Rose in *Football Factory*, the protagonist is not from the working class but creates the league for the female workers.

This connection between women's football and the working class is especially evident in *Nell O' Newcastle*, where Ned Bromley, the head overlooker at the mill, acts as the voice of reason and openly defends women's right to play. He strongly supports football as a sport for working-class women and challenges the idea that it should be reserved for men or the upper classes. As he puts it: "[Women] can keep their end oop at hockey, an' golf, an' swimming, an' tennis, so why shouldn't they play Soccer? Is Soccer any more risky than hunting t' hounds? No; but it's a danged sight cheaper, and if t' rich wimmen can have their sports, why shouldn't oor mill-lassiess?" (Don Gray, *Bess of Blacktown* 3) Ned's argument makes it clear that both class and gender shape who gets to play sports. He lists sports associated with wealthier women, like hockey, golf, swimming, and tennis, to show that more privileged women already have space in society to enjoy athletic pursuits. By making this argument, Ned insists that these working-class women deserve the same respect and chances in sport as those from higher social classes and football gives them access to a sport they can

enjoy. It is a clear challenge to the idea that some women's sports are more acceptable than others. He also rejects the bio-power argument, dismissing the idea that it is "any more risky" for women to play soccer than anything else. It is also worth mentioning that Ned's vivid dialect also marks him out as working-class himself, so his remarks can also be seen as a thorough expression of class solidarity.

Hockey has a contrasting history and culture to football in this regard. In its early years and modern structure, hockey was mostly "dominated by players, teams, and officials from the south of England, most of whom were university educated" (Evans 1039–40). Furthermore, Kathleen McCrone highlights the general attitude of both men and women of the middle classes as having "no desire to play with their social inferiors, and erected a variety of barriers to protect the cohesion of the bourgeois world and the integrity of its recreational activities'" (Evans 1041). Besides hockey, this position extended to other sports played by middle and upper classes. Jean Williams stresses this point as she states that games which achieved popularity at the turn of the twentieth century such as tennis and golf were intended to "exclude the lower classes" (Williams, *The History of Women's Football* 36). Unlike football, these sports for women were established and to a certain extent were seen as socially acceptable. Some of the mentioned sports even had their own official governing bodies so they had an inbuilt legislative protection against something like the FA ban. The England Women's Hockey Association (AEWHA), the governing body for women's hockey, was established in 1895 (Evans 1039). Ladies Golf Union, the governing body of women's golf, was established in 1893 (Hudson and Hudson Jr. 9). Women's football only formed something similar to an association as a result and in protest of the 1921 ban.

The image of the football woman now also has to acquire some differentiation according to class. If there are working-class football women, who show different attributes in terms of being resourceful, complicatedly entrepreneurial and radical, there is also the

emergence of a football woman from the management classes, in the form of Rose. The class each protagonist belongs to shapes her experiences and the kind of journey she takes. The working-class protagonists face the challenge of earning their right to play and gaining recognition equal to that of male players. Their football is often seen as a distraction from work or as something that lowers productivity. In response, they find ways to support the sport and make it fit within the demands of their jobs. These women speak up for the sport as a whole and work together to protect and promote it. Their actions reflect socialist feminist concerns (Melling, "Ray of the Rovers" 98) because they confront both gender discrimination and economic pressures that try to limit their involvement in sports. Rose Mallory, who comes from an upper-middle-class background, does not face the same barriers to playing or promoting the game. However, she most significantly contributes by using her position to create opportunities for working-class women.

The experiences of some protagonists differ from others when it comes to the impact of class on their life and how they are perceived. In *Ray of the Rovers*, the character Ray Lester works as a shop assistant at Bold Street Stores in Liverpool. Working in a shop is depicted as higher in status than working in a mill or factory: "Ray worked in a draper, which was in itself higher up the employment hierarchy than a factory job" (Melling, "Ray of the Rovers" 106). Katherine Mullin points out that "Shop work was envisioned as genteel" (2). The novel exposes how class-based barriers present an additional challenge for some women in sports, especially when pursuing such ambitions is seen as exceeding their social rank. This is pointed out by Ray's fellow female worker in the shop: "[...] This is Ray Lester, who milks the cows and honeys the bee, and all that sort of thing! She thinks she can design posh blouses, and she's quite sure she can play football!" (Hincks 5). The novel reveals how prejudice and prevailing social attitudes can diminish women's self-assurance and deter them from striving for greater social or professional advancement.

Unlike most of the previous protagonists (Nell Harmer, Bessie Booth, Meg Foster, and Rose Mallory), Ray did not establish her own football team; rather, she went through a trial to qualify to play for the Rovers. From the beginning of the story, she stands out as ambitious and determined. She is defined by her strong sense of purpose and clear goals. She confidently asserts her ambitions and why she moved to Liverpool:

> "I'm awfully keen on football. When my brothers were at home I used to practice with them, and I tried to form a girls' team in the village, but could not get enough support. I've been playing hockey a lot, so I'm in pretty good training; so when my father married again and I could not get on with my stepmother, I knew I should have to get a job, and so I determined to try to get into Rinsford's. I'm sure I sha'n't like an indoor life, but it will make up for it if I'm able to play for the famous Rovers!" (Hincks 2)

Ray's experience also highlights that a woman from a village was even more disadvantaged as football teams were almost exclusively organised among the urban working classes.

Before concluding this section on class, it is worth mentioning the use of language as a social marker, though not central to this research. However, the dissertation treats this topic as a general observation rather than in-depth discourse analysis. The writers of the 1920s fiction used strong working-class dialect in their football stories to make the fiction sound authentic to the lives of the factory workers, aligning football culture with the everyday culture of industrial working-class communities (Melling, "Ray of the Rovers" 104). Across the fictional accounts, the mill owners use a more conventional English while the protagonists themselves do not have a heavy dialect and often seen moving between types of language, but it is still telling of their working-class classification, except for Rose Mallory. What also brings this aspect of class and language to the front is the 2016 *Bess of the Bees* by David J. Williamson, which is a re-telling of the 1922 *Bess of Blacktown* by Don Gray. In the introduction of *Bess of the Bees*, Williamson draws attention to how the author of the original fictional work, "chose to include the strong Lancashire accent for the local characters" while Williamson opted for more conventional English in his version of the story,

as he states that “I did not feel this to be essential to understanding the characters or their words” (4) and his justification is linked to the reader as he sees the dialects used in the original text as “unnecessary hurdles over which the reader must jump” (4). He is selective: “One or two examples do remain – such as Ah for I, as well as some Northern expressions which add colour to the language and the characters” (4). Williamson’s intentional replacement of language in the text makes it more accessible to modern readers. However, this omission goes beyond language; it also erases part of the story that explores class difference and struggle. Arguably, his decision to part from the original dialect could be seen to an extent as an erasure of class significance.

Most of the female protagonists in this chapter, Nell, Bessie, Ray, and Meg, come from working-class backgrounds, with the notable exception of Rose in the novel *Football Factory.* She is portrayed as upper-middle-class, a status reflected not only in the fact that she was raised by her wealthy uncle after the death of her parents but also in her early access to activities like swimming, which was often associated with higher social standing. Although she works in the factory, Rose holds a managerial position and has ties to the ownership side of the business, which separates her from the other women. Her privileged upbringing provided her with a higher standard of living and protected her from the struggles the other protagonists endure. While the working-class women must fight for every opportunity, Rose benefits from class-based access to resources, influence, and support. Rose is better positioned to access opportunities and has the power to create them for others; a clear example is her contribution to establishing the women’s football league. This difference highlights how class shapes the paths available to individuals.

5.7 Feminine Ideals, Romance, and Beauty

The female football protagonist was often represented as a beauty and at times perceived as a sex object, conspicuously so by some of the same men who sought to deny her the right to

play football. In academic discussions about women's sports, there is a prominent focus on how female athletes challenge conventional feminine ideals. According to D. Stanley Eitzen, "Sport has been socially constructed as a masculine activity" (374). When it comes to sports participation, men are often expected to engage in sports as part of their masculine identity, whereas women are typically less encouraged from doing so (373). Following Eitzen's assertion that football is socially constructed as a "masculine activity," it stands to reason that women in football frequently face stereotypes of being overly masculine or 'butch,' and may even find their sexuality subject to scrutiny.

Across the football novels of the 1920s, female protagonists are consistently portrayed in ways that avoid any association with masculinity. The texts refrain from depicting these characters as 'masculine,' 'butch,' or using any similar labels. Instead, they emphasise the protagonists' conventional attractiveness, reinforcing their alignment with traditional standards of feminine beauty. Earlier we saw how the male gaze could sexually objectify the woman footballer, as was evidenced with the series of sexual assaults that some characters had to resist. Yet the texts also propose a different notion of femininity in which physical strength does not contradict beauty.

In the novels featuring Meg Foster, Nell Harmer, Ray Lester, Bessie Booth, and Rose Mallory, physical beauty is a central characteristic, consistently emphasised by the third person narrators. Nell Harmer, from *Nell O' Newcastle*, is described in explicitly aesthetic terms: "Tall, slender, yet lissomely strong, with eyes of the deepest blue, and masses of bronze-brown hair, which gleamed like burnished gold when the light caught it" (Nelson 2). Her "slender shoulders" and repeated references to her "blue eyes" and status as the "pretty, blue-eyed captain of Hood's Girls' Eleven" (8) reinforce her identity as both beautiful and feminine, even within the athletic world. Her romantic relationship with Philip Gray further ties her characterisation to traditional ideals of beauty and female modesty, as seen in the

line, “[...] Nell appeared, smiling up a little shyly at the handsome man who is now her husband…” (64). Despite her strength and leadership, Nell therefore remains aligned with conventional portrayals of femininity and dependence on male protection.

Similarly, Meg Foster is introduced and reintroduced throughout her trilogy as distinctly “pretty”. In *Meg Foster Footballer* she is described as “[...] a very pretty girl of eighteen—fairly tall and well-made. And just at present her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes sparkling” (*Meg Foster—Footballer* 1). This emphasis continues in *Captain Meg!*, where she is introduced as “Meg Foster. The pretty captain of the team of mill girl footballers who were about to sail for Australia in hope of bringing back the handsome Truscott trophy” (*Captain Meg!* 1), and again in *Football Island* as “Meg Foster, the pretty captain of Blake Crusaders” (*Football Island* 1). Although other aspects of Meg’s athleticism are emphasised in the texts, the repetition of her being described as “pretty” serves to reinforce a distinct image of her for the reader.

Ray Lester, like the other heroines, is introduced through vivid descriptions that emphasise her physical appearance. She is first seen as “a girl in a grey tweed costume and hat which blended so well with the grey of her eyes; her face was almost a perfect oval; red-gold hair gleamed under her hat, and the pretty mouth had a suggestion of firmness. She did not appear to be in the least nervous [...]” (Hincks 1). Her striking features are reinforced shortly after, when she is described as “the pretty girl with the red-gold hair” (4). The detailed attention given to her appearance reflects the same narrative tendency to define female protagonists primarily through beauty, presenting physical attractiveness as inseparable from their identity.

Bessie Booth and Rose Mallory are also framed through their attractiveness. Bessie is introduced as “a pretty dark-eyed girl, with curly chestnut hair and a slender, upright figure” (Don Gray, *Bess of Blacktown* 1), and this portrayal is echoed repeatedly: “She was a slim,

pretty girl, with curly hair and brown eyes" (22) and "Bessie Booth was a particularly pretty girl" (40). Similarly, Rose Mallory is described as a "pretty, brown-haired girl" (Don Gray, *The Football Factory* 53) and later as "the pretty girl". Her appeal is vividly captured in the line, "Rose Mallory was a strikingly pretty girl, with big brown eyes and a sunny smile" (59). These recurring descriptions suggest that there is a kind of compulsory "prettiness" at work that is not merely an incidental trait but a defining element of each protagonist's identity, shaping perspectives around what a female athlete could look like by reinforcing feminine ideals. "Prettiness" becomes a motif across the texts symbolising societal beauty standards; a defining characteristic of the protagonist.

Another aspect that could be seen as an intentional choice by the authors of the novels is the use of romantic subplots in every story. In a way, physical attractiveness, and the image of the "pretty" protagonist reinforced throughout the texts, sets narrative expectations that beauty necessarily leads to romance. Each female protagonist is paired with a male figure who is portrayed as a supportive partner: Nell Harmer and Philip Gray, Bessie Booth and Dick Brownell, Ray Lester and Hall Owen, Meg Foster and Tony Letchworth, and Rose Mallory and Jack Fleet. These romantic bonds reinforce conventional gender expectations across the novels, particularly the societal expectation of finding a suitor and getting married. The novels purposely show that women are not entirely stepping out of their expected roles when they demand the right to play football, as they continue to abide by other social norms. The texts attempt to present a balanced version of femininity, where demanding physical freedom does not mean abandoning gender expectations. They offer a 'palatable' kind of protagonist, one who is assertive but still feminine, who challenges norms by playing football but ultimately reinforces and fulfils traditional expectations.

For example, Meg Foster explicitly states her intention to leave football once she assumes the role of wife and homemaker: "'Wait till we've had our tour, Tony!' Said Meg,

with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes. 'We're both very young yet, and when I marry and have a husband and home to look after I shall give up football'" (*Captain Meg!* 64). Ray Lester, however, presents a more progressive take on gender and independence. Throughout the story, she embraces autonomy and challenges traditional roles. As a love story develops between her and Hal Owen, Ray acknowledges her affection for him but refuses to rush into engagement, valuing her freedom and passion for football: "Oh, I couldn't do that yet, Hal! You see, I had made up my mind to be a bachelor girl, but I think you have made me change my mind. Until I am sure, I'm not going to promise anything. We'll just be good pals!" (Hincks 52). Despite Hal's repeated proposals, Ray remains firm in her desire to retain her independence: "I think I love you, but I know I love my independence, the sporting crowd of girls, and playing for the Rovers, and I can't promise to give all that up until I am sure" (52). In the end, she takes a bold step, reversing expectations and nearly proposing to Hal herself, as she imagines a partnership built on both love and shared goals: "You old stupid [...] I want you to help me manage so many things— to make the business a success, to improve the sports ground and make the Rovers an even greater team next season, to be my partner! There! Do you want me to have to ask you to marry me?" (64). This closing scene symbolises Ray's ability to balance affection and autonomy, breaking conventional barriers, almost a gender reversal moment, by taking the lead in defining both her romantic and professional future.

Football is utilised in the texts to show that even as women are portrayed as fighting for greater freedom, putting the spotlight on the game, showcasing talent, succeeding as businesswomen, demonstrating skill as workers, and asserting independence, they are ultimately confined by the expectation of marriage. These women are presented within certain limits, reinforcing traditional feminine ideals, beauty standards, and the expectation of marriage. This could be read as a representation that despite their progress, the protagonists

remain shaped by and expected to conform to conventional gender norms. The fictions therefore may both challenge and reinforce the gender norms of that time.

5.8 Conclusion

The only novel discussed in this chapter that is technically considered 'pre-ban' is *Meg Foster - Footballer* (18 November 1921), the remaining novels are from the post-ban era including: *Captain Meg!* (15 December 1922), *Football Island* (12 January 1922), *Bess of Blacktown* (01 December 1922), *Nell O' Newcastle* (15 June 1922), *Ray of the Rovers* (17 November 1922), and *The Football Factory* (February 1923). However, the 1921 English Football Association ban is never mentioned in the texts, rather it took the form of a male character with the resources and authority to assert his power over the young women who wanted to play football either by "forbidding" them to play or withholding access to grounds and funds that could make the game possible. As the series of fictions of the early 1920s ends with Rose Mallory's story, it leaves us with a dreamlike hopeful image of women's football that was not possible to achieve during the ban. The entire series of fictions from 1921-1922 arguably stands as a form of protest against the ban. To achieve this, the chapter considered Jennifer Hargreaves' foundational work in the field of sports feminism.

The texts showed a revolutionary dissent against the injustices experienced in the workplace, and also women's fight to be granted the right to have access to spaces and ability to play the game, while also reforming the workspace and utilising their work skills to fight. All the excuses used by the FA and the public of football being dangerous, disgraceful, shameful, and unfeminine are presented to an extenet in the fiction. Don Gray presented the vision of a female character in a no-ban land that could be seen as a nod to the suffragettes, a prophecy that this will not last forever, and that a different reality is possible, not now, but some day. Fiction of the 1920s cast women footballers as heroic and dynamic figures, struggling against the forces of capital and hegemonic masculinity. They conformed in

appearance to ideals of “prettiness” but also were seen in more exalted and statuesque terms, exemplifying another kind of beauty that was physically and socially active as they were given considerable agency. However, they were to a degree products of male imaginations, however sympathetic. The writers of the fictions may be seen to lend their voices to female protagonists who oppose any form of ban.

Chapter Six: The Protagonist in Prose Fiction 2019-2022

6.1 Introduction

This chapter looks at texts published between 2019 and 2022. The first part of the chapter explores the novels *Violet's War* (2021) and *Vi for Victory* (2021) both by Rosemary J. Kind, and *The Match: An Unsuitable Game* (2022) by Diana Townsend. The twenty-first-century fiction situates the protagonist in World War One Britain, where she assumes a new role in the labour force at a time when her sense of loyalty, patriotism, and faith are being tested. Through the representation of Violet Dobson, Florrie Walsh, and Alice, the novels directly challenge the government's failure in managing the war, emphasising that the protagonists' impact extends far beyond their job in munition factories. Through football and charity matches, the protagonists take meaningful action to support their nation in ways the government ought to have but did not.

Later, through the protagonists of the novels *Our Beautiful Game* (2021) by Lou Kuenzler, *Kicking off: Dick, Kerr Girls* (2020) and *All Together Now: Dick, Kerr Girls* (2022) by Eve Ainsworth, the chapter discusses the emerging theme of LGBTQ+ visibility. The protagonists' sexuality and the non-heterosexual relationships depicted in the texts, are analysed through the theoretical approaches of queer theory, specifically the scholarship of Heidi Eng. The chapter also problematises the use of Lily Parr as a dominant figure across texts. Additionally, the chapter looks into the tomboy figure in the two novels *Lily and the Rockets* (2019) by Rebecca Stevens and *Our Beautiful Game* (2021).

This chapter examines how the selected novels reveal, communicate, and interpret modern issues faced by women footballers, despite the advancements and progress made since the first group of fiction was published in the early 1920s. This close-to-a-century gap between the two groups of fiction selected in this dissertation, dictates a shift in representations towards more diversity and inclusivity. Read collectively, these works allow

readers to interrogate how structures can be reimagined and, on occasions, reformed. This reimagining of the past through fictional narratives, however, necessitates reformulating and reinterpreting the history of the game. In this chapter, the female protagonists' methods of asserting agency appear different than the 1920s protagonist where it could be described subtler and less confrontational, reflecting a softer approach to challenging situations and the negotiation of power.

These recent works cater to a range of audiences, with some novels aimed at younger readers, such as *Lily and the Rockets* (2019), *Our Beautiful Game* (2021), and Eve Ainsworth's *Kicking Off: Dick, Kerr Girls* (2020) and *All Together Now: Dick, Kerr Girls* (2022). Other novels are more suitable for a more mature reader, such as *Violet's War* (2021) and *Vi for Victory* (2021), and *The Match: An Unsuitable Game* (2022). This categorisation of readership, as mentioned in the introduction of the dissertation, is based on the protagonist's age and the themes discussed in each novel. Whatever their intended readerships, these novels continue the legacy of early women's football fiction, bringing these historical events to a new generation of readers, and showing yet another reimagination of the woman footballer.

The female football protagonists featured in all the novels from 1921–1923 and 2019–2022 are consistently portrayed as part of the workforce. This reflects the First World War's direct impact on the type of protagonist that emerged in literature. While the earlier novels (early 1920s) are less focused on the war itself, the twenty-first-century novels reimagine World War One Britain through the lives of their protagonists, placing significant emphasis on that historical period, and their time as munition workers. In these modern tellings, every female protagonist, without exception, ends up working in a munitions factory, whether motivated by patriotism, the better pay, or as an escape from domestic work. Though the representations differ, the emphasis here on how similar the protagonists are in the approach

they all took to help with the war effort, reflects the collective responsibility and the high sense of patriotism they have in common. However, the protagonists differ in the level of scepticism they have towards the war which makes them question not their loyalty but their comprehension of the consequences of the war and the actions of those in power.

As the war transformed the socioeconomic landscape for women, the novels also explore the physical freedoms women began to claim, particularly through sport. Football, which became popular again, surfaced as a symbol of their existence in spaces traditionally reserved for men. As mentioned throughout the dissertation, women often played football at work during breaks, just as men once did, becoming part of a workplace culture that had previously never existed for them. In this group of fictions, the munition factory serves as the primary setting for the protagonists' football-related activities. Yet, the contact with football begins at home in most of the novels. In the Blakeford household, Hettie and Martha learn football from their brother Freddie, Polly Nabb from her brother Joe, Lily Dodd from her father; Violet Dobson's learns from both her husband and father, and Florrie Walsh from her brother. The fact that each protagonist is influenced by a male figure in their football development reinforces the perception of football as a sport rooted in masculinity.

The novels also emphasise how temporary the progress in the women's game was. Most of the fictional accounts capture how once the war ended; many women were forced out of the workforce and lost their place in football. The game, which had become a part of their daily lives and a symbol of their expanding freedoms, was once again framed as a male domain, women's participation in football was tightly bound to the wartime and workplace context. The English Football Association ban of 1921, arguably, aimed to solidify this limitation.

6.2 War Football: "On Her Their Lives Depend"

The first three novels discussed in this chapter are less clearly aimed at young adult readers, they are more heavily focused on WWI. In *Violet's War*, *Vi for Victory*, and *The Match: An Unsuitable Game,* the war serves as a backdrop and a force in shaping characters' individual journeys. The protagonist of the two novels *Violet's War* and *Vi for Victory*, Violet Dobson, plays different roles in the novels as daughter, daughter-in-law, mother, and a devoted wife and each role burdens her with different types of responsibilities. The novels portray the traditional roles Violet fulfils, and her sense of patriotism which is central to her story. Her loyalty to her country gives her strength to endure her husband's absence, leading her to take a dangerous job at Caulder and Harrison munition factory, which eventually helps her raise money for the war through football.

In *The Match: An Unsuitable Game* (2022) by Diana Townsend, war also changed the lives of 18-year-old Florrie Walsh and Alice. The two best friends start to work at Dick, Kerr Munition Works where they utilise football to help with the war effort. Through their personal experiences of loss, Alice, Florrie, and Violet are given no time to mourn the lives they once knew before the war. In seeking meaning amid the chaos, they take matters into their own hands by aiding the wounded. The novels reveal that while the government prioritised funding for munitions, it turned a blind eye to the urgent need for hospital beds and care for the injured which becomes a central issue raised in the novels mentioned.

With the start of the First World War, women's sports, and specifically football, witnessed a new era. As established in the third chapter, women's participation in football in Britain found a space to play the game with the start of the First World War (Goldblatt 180), with factory teams forming and developing. This type of physical activity became popular among young working-class women as it was part of the mill/factory culture. As part of her work at the munition factory, Violet Dobson played with Billingbrook Women's Football

Team, and Florrie and Alice for the Dick, Kerr munition factory team. Polly, Lily, Martha and Hettie, the protagonists that will be discussed later in this chapter, also played for their munition factory football teams. However, as women's participation in a male-dominated game sparked controversy, women players had to push back against hostility and fight for a place on the field. This occurred in tandem with a period in British history that saw broader change in the social dynamics of the time, especially in women's life.

The increased participation in football by women, was a result of women having to step into the workforce in large numbers to fill in for the men who left to fight in the war. Between the years 1914 and 1918, two million women replaced men in the workforce, which increased the percentage of women in total employment from 24% in July 1914 to 37% by November 1918 ("Suffrage in Wartime"). As a result, domestic service, the job once considered "the largest single trade for women," was in decline despite the fact that the census figures showed 1,734,040 female servants were in the job market on the eve of the First World War (Braybon 26). The decline may have been due to the newly available options that were previously unavailable to women before the war, such as jobs at munition plants. The girls and women who worked in factories preferred the "hard work for a limited number of hours, followed by freedom to do what one chose in the evenings" (26) over domestic service, where their lives may have been more controlled and the conditions more oppressive (26).

The urgent need to replace men, sent to war, opened a myriad of opportunities for women as they "filled in for absent men in communal labor, religious organizations, and local charities; they [also] created new organizations to cater to the wartime needs of children, mothers, refugees, and, above all, soldiers" (Grayzel and Proctor 7). Despite their vital role, women were not considered as equal substitutes; rather, they were something of a last resort:

> To some extent, women's factory work started with the idea of deficiency, namely, that women were the least desirable option out of the other alternatives being used,

> which included prisoners of war, refugees, or imperial subjects […] Women were seen as physically weaker, likely to produce less; they were unwilling, unreliable, and untrained (Thom 50-51).

Having to share the factories with women was a source of anxiety especially for men (Grayzel and Proctor 7). This was not wholly out of gender bias, but out of fear that women would take over their jobs as they were paid less for the same amount of work ("World War I: 1914-1918 | Striking Women| Women and Work"). This issue of women receiving lower pay in munitions work and the impact it might have on skilled men coming back from the war was acknowledged in a statement by the head of the newly created Ministry of Munitions, Minister Lloyd George, on 21 October 1915: "It would be a violation of the spirit and the letter of the Munitions Act if the employment of women or unskilled men on munitions work should be utilised for the purpose of lowering the remuneration of men customarily engaged on that class of work"("Munitions of War Act 1915"). The Munitions of War Act 1915 which he refers to, required that the trade union agreement pause restrictive practices to increase munitions production, allowing less skilled and female labour in roles traditionally held by skilled men. In return, the government pledged to restore these protections after the war, alternatively through the 1919 Act (Rubin 927). So, Munitionettes and other women workers had to endure the hardships of their jobs and face the reality of the temporality of their presence in the workforce.

Townsend's *The Match: An Unsuitable Game* highlights how women in the factory are viewed with bitterness by some and with respect by others for their vital role in the war. First, the novel reveals a bitter attitude layered with tension towards the women in the factory. This is evident when Alice cannot hold back her tears as she is working, remembering the new reality of her boyfriend Jack's state after being injured at war. When Alice went back to work, she was harassed by a male worker because she was seen crying: "Oh dear, what's the matter? work too much for you, is it?" Alice turned away, wiping her

face, but the man leaned toward her. “What did you expect, you silly bitch? A factory’s no place for snivelling lasses” (Townsend 45). Mary, another female worker, tried to warn Alice: “Don’t fret, lass,” she said, “but […] you can’t let things show. Not here. Whatever you might be feeling, you have to keep it all inside” (45). This exchange shows the emotional pressure placed on women, who are expected to suppress their feelings in order to survive the harsh environment of the factory.

But it was when Sydney Philpotts saw Alice the second time crying where things escalated: “You’re pathetic,” he jeered. “Why don’t you bugger off where you belong?” (Townsend 56). Mary interferes to deescalate the situation: “Let her be!” (56). However, Sydney replies, “Why? because she’s a lass? Because she is doing her bit? That’s what you want, isn’t it? Folks saying how noble you are?” (57). When Alice expresses “All I want is to do my job,” (57) Sydney resentfully states “But it’s not your job, is it? That job belongs to some poor sod that’s been sent to the front. And why? Because lasses like you couldn’t wait to take his place [...] and the lad that should be here, working this drill, when he gets blown to kingdom come, whose fault is it going to be then?” (57). Mary once again urges Sydney to leave Alice alone and ends up insulting him by calling him a “yellow bastard” (57). The words triggered Sydney, who punched Mary, leaving her with a bloody nose. However, it was Mary who was punished by being transferred to the fuse room (57-58). This incident shows how emotional and physical violence are used to maintain male dominance.

Despite the hostility women face in the factory, the novel reveals that their contributions are valued by those on the front lines. As Victor, a fellow male worker, tries to console Mary after she is punished for defending Alice, he reminds her, “The lads in the trenches think you lot are heroines, [...] Tommy’s Sisters, they call you [...] you are guardian bloody angels” (Townsend 60). His words contrast with Sydney’s resentment, highlighting

the divide between those who recognise women's sacrifices and those who view them as intruders in male-dominated spaces.

However, despite this newly acquired 'visibility' their work was frequently framed within the context of "doing their bit […] and for the duration" (Grayzel and Proctor 7). Though they took pride in their role serving the country, Violet Dobson had valid concerns regarding her husband joining the troops, but the sense of duty grew in her and she found a way to do her part as well, "'Munitions Workers Needed. Help the War Effort. Apply Within'" (J. Kind, *Violet's War* 73). Violet, who is also referred to in the novel as Vi, was excited about this new role, and seems keen on supporting Billy, her husband, and others at the Front, "She couldn't wait to write to Billy to tell him the good news. She would be doing her bit for the war effort and helping to make sure he and others going to the Front had what they needed. It was better paid than the hat factory too; longer hours, but that would be alright" (75–76). Despite the dangerous work conditions, Vi took pride in her job, viewing the canary-coloured hair as "[...] almost a badge of honour, displaying their part in the war effort" (J. Kind, *Vi's Victory* 12). This visible symbol of the yellow-coloured hair, as a result of working in a munition factory, reinforced her sense of purpose within her community, "She was proud of how it looked; it showed she was working for the war effort" (*Violet's War* 80).

In *The Match: An Unsuitable Game*, the novel uses football to critique the government's handling of the war, highlighting how it glorifies sacrifice while placing the burden of responsibility on ordinary citizens. This is evident in a scene where "GIVE OUR BOYS THE TOOLS THEY NEED," appear on posters surrounding a muddy tank from the trenches (72) and "young women sat at tables selling war bonds" (72). Ruth, one of the characters in the story stresses, "if we buy war bonds from the government, the government can use the money to buy tanks" (72). The narrative, however, reveals the government's

manipulation of the public. When Florrie sees a nurse begging for donations, she says, “And you shouldn’t have to stand here begging,” adding, “It’s not right. It’s not fair. Someone has to do something” (73). Her words expose the moral dilemma caused by the failure of the system, pointing to the government’s prioritisation of munitions over the welfare of those already sacrificing so much. The novel ultimately offers a criticism of the government’s failure to support the nation while pressuring them to carry the financial and emotional weight of the war.

A conversation between Florrie and her father about the war reveals the failure of the government to prepare and plan adequately, particularly in their failure to anticipate the scale of casualties and the need for adequate medical facilities: “They must have known there would be lots of soldiers wounded,” (Townsend 51). Her father recalls an earlier claim by the government that war would “be over by Christmas,” (51) revealing an inaccurate estimation by the government. His description of how “our poor lads would be slogging backwards and forwards over the same bit of mud year after year” (52) illustrate a bleak image of the front lines, far removed from the optimistic “fancy plans” made at the start. When Florrie’s father says, “They had no idea what was coming,” (52) it clearly show how unready the authorities were for the true scale and nature of the war.

How war is perceived by the protagonists is not fixed and keeps changing. For example, in *Violet’s War*, after Vi’s husband, Billy, returns home with life-altering wounds, the reader starts to notice Violet’s change of attitude towards the war and this shift marks her as a dynamic character. Her epiphany can be seen when she visits her husband Billy in the hospital and sees the amount of suffering and loss families are experiencing, “She was becoming all too aware that this was the reality of war. It was no good saying you supported what your country was doing and then closing your mind to the effect it had” (J. Kind, *Vi’s Victory* 19–20). Now Vi is faced with new challenges, where she needs both physical and

mental strength to take care of her husband. The story shows Vi as a loyal and devoted wife, this loyalty and love is put to the test as she now has to endure the physical scars of Billy: "His mam is finding his injuries hard to accept, but if I have to nurse him for the rest of his life, I'll do it. He's still my Billy" (J. Kind, *Vi's Victory* 13). But this was not all, Vi also is faced with yet another challenge to help Billy deal and cope with the trauma of the battlefield:

> "I still have dreadful nightmares. When I come home it might be better for me to sleep on my own somewhere."
> "I want to be there for you, however hard it is" (J. Kind, *Vi's Victory* 32).

Alice in *The Match: An Unsuitable Game*, experiences a testing time as well. Her boyfriend Jack is badly injured and does not recognise Alice. Alice and Florrie go to the church to pray for Jack but "the church was empty. The gloominess tempered by a solitary candle burning on a stand near the altar, its shining flame vibrating in the draught, sending dull glints of light into the arching shadows of the ceiling" (Townsend 41). The image suggests the loss of faith not necessarily in religion per se but in institutions backing a government that is failing the nation. Florrie who had always found it easy to speak to God, was raised in a religious family that attended church regularly, and where her mother taught her to pray each evening is now struggling to maintain her faith. She realises her faith in God is shaken, "[…] her mind was filled with confusion. And anger. She pushed the feelings away and closed her eyes" (41–42). Florrie finds herself facing a new reality, where she is determined to help in any way possible with the war effort.

Amid the hardships of war, football gives Vi, Florrie, Alice and their colleagues a sense of purpose. In the selected novels, their role extends beyond what is done in the factory. Florrie, Alice and Violet play a role in the war effort by playing charity football matches to raise funds. This comes after failed attempts to raise money in a more conventional way. For example, in *The Match: An Unsuitable Game*, the women at the factory tried a bake sale first

(79). There were fears that Mrs. Cronshaw, the welfare officer, would not allow the bake sale, but to their surprise she did: "Well, I suppose we must support the war effort whenever we can, so you have my permission to go ahead" (79). The bake sale did not go as they had hoped, so they decided to utilise their passion for football to raise funds by organising a charity match: "That's what we're good at! Football! We can put on a match!" (89).

However, not everybody thought it was 'appropriate' to play football to gather funds. Violet Dobson was hesitant at first, but the urgent need to raise money for hospitals to serve the injured soldiers, forced her to let go of her concerns about how she may be perceived for a greater cause:

> Vi thought about what he was doing, facing the enemy. In a moment of clarity it occurred to her that if Billy or Stan were to come back injured, she'd want them to have the very best of medical care. She wouldn't want the hospital to be short of anything they needed. What point was worrying about how people might see her, if, as a result, she didn't help men who were in desperate need; men who had had the courage to fight for their country? (J. Kind, *Vi's Victory* 107)

Violet, Alice, Florrie, and their colleagues, driven by their sense of responsibility, used football as a means to help in the war effort. This image of the female footballer stands out as one whose high sense of patriotism did not fall for the government's propaganda. It shows their political awareness of the extent of the situation their country is in, and the direct impact it has on the nation at large and their loved ones. The protagonists proved successful in the approach they took to help the wounded. However, it was only a matter of time before they were let got from the factory and, as a result, they had to let go of football as well.

With the announcement of the end of the First World War on 11 November 1918, hundreds of factory girls knew it was only a matter of time before they would be made redundant, despite their vital role in keeping the country running. With the return of men from war, "the increased presence of women in the workplace began to be perceived as threatening to the nation's return to 'normalcy', and the Restoration of Pre-War Practices Act

of 1919 forced many women out of their wartime factory jobs" (Hoffman 20). Government officials and employers had little difficulty dismissing women after the war; they simply claimed that "women were not that good and did not do as much as men" (Thom 50). This contradicts a time when women were widely recognised and celebrated for their contributions to the nation, particularly between early 1915 and 1917 (50). Nevertheless, the 1917 Representation of the People Act granted voting rights to women over thirty in recognition of their wartime service (Osborne 22). This arguably maybe viewed as a small consolation.

6.3 LGBTQ+ Visibility in Fiction

The chapter now turns to the emerging theme and representation of LGBTQ+ experiences that arguably speaks to the modern state of the women's game. The early 1920s fiction previously discussed in Chapter Five, predominantly centres on white, heterosexual female protagonists. In each narrative, the heroine's pursuit of football is intertwined with a romantic subplot involving a supportive male figure who often assumes a protective role. Though a queer reading of the 1920s texts cannot be eliminated entirely, the scope of analysis remained on the obvious heterosexual relations formed within those texts. This part of the analysis, however, pivots to how the recent fiction could be read through a queer lens as non-heterosexual bonds form among female characters, aligning with broader shifts in women's football where is it arguably perceived as a queer-friendly space. This part of the chapter draws on gender and sexuality studies, specifically queer theory, to examine the twenty-first-century protagonists in *Our Beautiful Game* by Lou Kuenzler, *Kicking Off: Dick, Kerr Girls* and *All Together Now: Dick, Kerr Girls* by Eve Ainsworth. The analysis is informed by Heidi Eng's use of queer theory in the context of sports where she offers a critical lens for unpacking non-heteronormative relationships and identities that surface in contemporary fiction, revealing how characters navigate their feelings and gender expectations.

The selected fictions introduce non-heterosexual protagonists and queer themes, increasing visibility and inclusion for LGBTQ+ identities. This could be seen as a shift in football fiction that mirrors broader perceptions about the female football player in the broader sense of sports representation. The gap between the early 1920s publications and the recent stories from 2019 to 2022 has allowed contemporary writers to explore themes that would have been arguably considered too bold for earlier decades. The 1920s fiction presented women as heterosexual by default and made sure to add a romantic subplot for confirmation. The chapter argues that later fictional interpretations strongly resonate with the modern state of the women's game, which is often promoted as an empowering and safe space for queer identities. The difference between the groups of fictional representations is in itself a reference to history as a contested space, susceptible to variously motivated readings and powerful misreadings, all of which have their fascinations. This part of the chapter argues that the representation of tomboy and lesbian characters in the modern fiction is not a forced inclusion, but a natural and intentional choice by writers, as it resonates with the modern state of the women's game and reinforces its image as a queer-friendly and empowering space for LGBTQ+ identities. This is not to ignore other readings. The chapter also acknowledges that such narratives may not feel empowering to everyone, particularly those who have distanced themselves from sport to avoid having their sexuality assumed or subjected to surveillance.

As discussed in the *Handbook of Sports Studies ,* women in sports face more scrutiny than men when it comes to topics such as sexuality and sexual identities (Eitzen 375). This is evident in women's football and the inclusion of lesbian characters in the selected group of novels seems to mirror existing perceptions about the female football player. The lesbian football player emerges in the young adult novels, which arguably serves a purpose. As LeeAnn Kriegh and Mary Kane point out this representation should be carefully understood in terms of what it attempts to communicate, "[...] because young adults who are beginning to

form and accept their identity – including their sexual identity – can be significantly influenced by this genre" (27). Therefore, as much as visibility is empowering to a group of young readers, who identify as lesbians aspiring to take on the sport, it is important to acknowledge that there are readers who want to play the game but fear that their sexuality will be under continuous speculation, and presumptions that they are 'gay' or 'lesbian' might push them away from the sport. Like any piece of fiction, it will not appeal to everyone, and it is not the author's responsibility to reach every reader, but it is the author's responsibility to consider the messages that the texts communicate to young readers, and in this case not to reinforce stereotypes that could impact how a group of young readers perceive the sport.

In "Changing the Game: Homophobia, Sexism, and Lesbians in Sport," Pat Griffin focuses on lesbianism as a label that defines females within their community: "The lesbian label is used to define the boundaries of acceptable female behaviour in a patriarchal culture. When a woman is called a lesbian, she knows she is out of bounds" (Eitzen 375). Barbara Creed looks further into lesbian bodies and stereotypes: "there is one popular stereotype about the nature of lesbianism which does posit a recognizable lesbian body. This view, which has been dominant in different historical periods and is still prevalent today, is that the lesbian is really a man trapped in a woman's body" (Creed 112). Jayne Caudwell suggests "the lesbian image is one of the most popular notions of women who play football in the United Kingdom, in particular, the butch lesbian identity" ("Women's Football in the United Kingdom" 391). The article further highlights that the construction of lesbian sexuality happens when females "prioritize the masculine over the feminine" (392). No matter what the definition or understanding of the lesbian sports figure suggests, the way the players individually and collectively react to the classifications differ.

This is not an aspect addressed in the selected fiction, but for a wider understanding of the lesbian figure in sport, it is important to highlight here what the research reveals about how female footballers often deal with these labels and stereotypes, mainly by aligning themselves with one of two groups. Some female players might be seen to fit the lesbian stereotype of female football players, while others seem to actively resist it, and try to push back. The most obvious way of enforcing or denouncing this image is through clothing. As uniformity in players' kits is essential in the game, so using clothing to resist or confirm sexuality is relevant when players are off the pitch. While players who identify as lesbians tend to express their gender identity by rejecting "all forms of clothing that might associate her image with that of a heterosexual woman" (Creed 122–23). Other players "use appearance and clothes to resist the stereotype of being a lesbian player" (Caudwell, "Women's Football in the United Kingdom" 395). This amplifies Simone de Beauvoir's famous take on women and gender formation that "one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one" (De Beauvoir et al. 301). Or rather, it is a matter of "performativity" as Judith Butler describes it (Butler 530). Either way, the two groups find themselves again under surveillance. Some players may feel the need to prove they are not lesbian by making their sexual identity known to the public by confirming and embracing "voluntary disciplinary" feminine ideals. Others might also make their sexuality known, which, in some cases, takes precedence over their athletic identity.

In the selected novels, authors Lou Kuenzler and Eve Ainsworth choose not to 'problematise' the lesbian figure. The authors do not explicitly discuss societal views that might have been intolerable of non-heteronormative tendencies. Instead, through the progression of events, the focus is on each of the protagonist's moments of realisation about their own sexuality and the impact this has on their understanding of themselves and its reception within their small circle of peers. Homosexuality in the selected novels is not

completely portrayed as a source of fear, but rather as something they are trying to understand, accept, and, at times, respond to. The novels stop at a point where the protagonists realise homosexuality as a challenge, not at a point where they are set to overcome this challenge or deal with the forces that consider it a challenge.

In Lou Kuenzler's *Our Beautiful Game*, the growth of the main character Polly is seen dynamically, not only in the context of the football pitch and her relationship with the different forces surrounding it, but also in the romantic relationship that develops in the novel between her and another female character, Clara. Football in the text gives Polly the space to explore her sexuality, which is when she challenges the heteronormative assumptions which might be set for a female. It is important to note that the chapter defines its characters' representations in the selected fiction as 'queer' by understanding the different representations through mainly Heidi Eng's insights on 'heterosexuality' and 'heteronormativity' as outlined earlier in the methodology chapter. For Eng, the two terms cannot be used interchangeably. 'Heterosexuality' revolves around the "two-sex model- the couple comprised of him and her" this model is what Eng suggests is expected and celebrated in a heteronormative culture ("Queer Athletes" 51). Therefore, as with the expectation placed on the early 1920s protagonists discussed in Chapter Five, for Polly, finding a male suitor, getting married, and having children is considered as the 'norm' and the 'natural' thing to do. This is an inevitable fate for Polly, at least from her mother's perspective. However, Polly drifts away from those expectations. She seems to have a different understanding of her role in life from the predetermined ones such as wife/mother that, as Beauvoir argues, have "been artificially promoted as the most important roles for women in society and […] inscribed in the laws, customs, beliefs and culture of society" (Tidd 52). Polly explicitly expresses her attitude towards those roles after an overwhelming and uncomfortable experience when she had to help deliver her little sister, Queenie: "'Don't be stupid!' Mam snapped. 'You'll have

to do this yourself one day. You might as well learn' 'Oh no!' said Polly firmly. 'I'm never going to have children'" (Kuenzler 63). Polly's reluctance to embrace a traditional 'reproductive role' foreshadows the development of an 'unconventional' romantic relationship later in the novel. This started when Polly felt an immediate connection the minute she met Clara, the daughter of Polly's host family. This instant attraction uncovers a new dimension of Polly's character and is vividly described in the text when they first met:

> 'Hello there, Polly …' Clara, who was washing her hands at the sink, turned round and smiled. Polly felt a funny lurch in the pit of her stomach, as though she had flown too high on a swing. Clara was the prettiest girl she'd ever seen; no, more than pretty—beautiful. Polly stared. She had big blue eyes and dark shiny hair the colour of polished wood on a church pew. There was a sparkling of freckles on her nose and a little gap between her two front teeth, which showed when she smiled (Kuenzler 290).

However, as the narrative progresses, the author never shows the reader how other characters in the story perceive this relationship and focuses on an intimate moment between the two. This, arguably, could be the author's strategy to sidestep the depiction of their relationship as 'taboo.' The story is framed in heteronormative culture with the absence of any homophobia as it is not a topic of discussion in the novel. It could be seen as a conscious choice to avoid presenting any negative reception of the character, whether from their families or peers. The intent seems to be to keep the textual emphasis on empowerment rather than controversy, to steer away from the kind of violent reaction that Heidi Eng claims can come from a threatened heteronormativity ("Queer Athletes" 51). Instead, the author simply hints that this is not how Polly is supposed to feel when she experiences this epiphany and subtly captures Polly's internal conflict when she recognises the beauty of Clara's blue eyes: "Girls weren't supposed to notice what colour each other's eyes were … or certainly not compare them to jewels. Polly knew she wasn't meant to feel about Clara's beautiful eyes the way she did, just looking in them made her happy" (Kuenzler 324). Therefore, the author avoids any external views on the matter. Rather, the author chooses to show us how heteronormativity is present

in Polly's consciousness, through Polly's realisation "she wasn't meant to feel" for Clara. That knowledge only sharpens that desire and challenges what she is wired to know and is supposed to, or in this case, what she is not meant, to feel.

As the story continues to unfold, Clara in turn develops feelings for Polly: "I liked what you said about my eyes,' she whispered, squeezing Polly's arms. 'Fancy them being Caribbean blue'" (Kuenzler 325). This mutual affection is confirmed on Christmas Day, as Clara's gift for Polly is a kiss that signals her acceptance of Polly's love: "'Clara liked her … she kissed her and called her 'lovely.'" (391). Polly and Clara's relationship continues within a setting that would consider such relationships as 'queer' behaviour. In this context, 'queer' aligns with Eng's definition where it is "'Practices, as acts, or as speech, and as representations, bodies that do not signify 'the normal' or the 'wanted'" ("Queer Athletes" 52). Additionally, Eng considers 'queer' "a collective term for what can be seen as 'unnatural'/'not normal' in a dominantly heterosexual culture, for example one's body, behaviour, values, appearance and sexual orientation" (52). But this is not the only novel in the recently published fiction on women's football that touches on and explores sexuality and presents relationships that fall under Eng's definition of 'queer'. In the broader context of the novels, there are similar explorations in other works, such as the novels *Kicking Off: Dick, Kerr Girls* and *All Together Now: Dick, Kerr Girls.* This suggests a thematic trend in this fiction that allows for more discussions on sexuality within the fiction and in relation to the broader context of women in sports at large, but football in particular.

Queer representation is present specifically through the main characters Hettie Blakeford in *Kicking Off: Dick, Kerr Girls* and Martha Blakeford in *All Together Now: Dick, Kerr Girls*. Hettie, the protagonist of the first book of Eve Ainsworth's trilogy, *Kicking Off*, describes herself as "a gangly fifteen-year-old with frizzy hair" (1). She is also depicted as passive and having no power over her life. This is evident when she was called up to help in

the war effort and work at the Dick, Kerr factory: “[I] barely [had] a sensible thought in my head - I wasn’t as frantic as some girls I knew. I didn’t cry, [...] I didn’t know what to expect; I simply accepted my fate and tried to make the best of it” (1–2). Throughout the story, Hettie is portrayed as a reserved and shy character.

Her shyness surfaces multiple times, especially in Hettie’s interactions with Flo, another female character who works at the Dick, Kerr factory and plays football. Hettie’s reactions to Flo reveal subtle queer undertones, as seen in passages like: “Flo turned round to face us, one eyebrow raised. She really was quite beautiful. I had difficulty looking at her directly; I suddenly felt quite shy” (23), and, “‘Do you play, then?’ I asked her, amazement swirling in my belly. It was all I could do not to grin at her like a complete idiot” (24). Hettie’s growing attraction to Flo is further hinted at when she admits, “I could feel myself turn red again” (24). Another instance occurs when Flo speaks to Hettie, causing her to blush: “My cheeks reddened. ‘Of course, Flo,’ I said quietly” (67). Later in the novel, when Hettie shares news that she will no longer be part of the team, with Alice and Flo, Alice offers support on behalf of the team, but Flo’s response feels more personal, reinforcing the queer implications: “‘We have each other,’ Flo said firmly, looping her arm in mine. ‘We must remember that. We have each other to help us through these hard times’” (157). Furthermore, in a conversation between the two, following Hettie’s decision not to play football anymore, Flo insists that Hettie should still be part of the team even if it is just handing out oranges at half-time. This interaction also suggests a queer connection the two share: “‘Thanks,’ I said, smiling shyly [...] Flo paused and grabbed my shoulders, turning me to look at her. Her eyes were blazing with passion as she stared down at me with such intensity it almost made me flinch” (157). This connection between the characters hints at a deeper intimate bond, suggesting a queer narrative within the novel.

In the third novel of Ainsworth's trilogy, the queer representations are more explicit. Martha, the main character of *All Together Now: Dick, Kerr Girls,* initially expresses her admiration for the athletic prowess of her teammate, Lily Parr. As the plot progresses, she soon finds her feelings deepening as she learns about Parr's romantic preferences. Martha realises this transition in her feelings when she is talking to her father about her desire to get a job, and he suggests she finds a husband instead: "Husband? My skin grew cold at the thought. I pulled my hand away from Dad. What would he think if he could see inside my mind? If he knew that Lily Parr was the only person I wanted. How I dreamt of touching her. Kissing her" (137). Martha's thoughts convey the heightening of her internal conflict regarding her sexuality.

But, unlike *Our Beautiful Game,* which tends to avoid depicting the reaction of characters to the sexual revelations in the novel, *All Together Now* addresses the reception of Parr's fellow teammates to her sexual orientation, which is depicted as very understanding, open-minded, and accepting of her sexuality. This is evident in the novel when Alice Norris tells the girls about Lily's sexual orientation:

> "Our Lil doesn't like lads - not in that way anyway. She never has. She likes girls."
> "Oh …" Flo said slowly. "I mean … that's all right, isn't it? It makes no difference to us."
> Alice Norris grinned. "I knew you would all understand. I will tell Lily I told you. It'll be nice for her to know that you won't treat her any differently."
> "Why would we?" Alice Kell asked. "Nothing's changed, has it?"
> Everyone nodded with agreement, murmuring their approval (121–22).

This reaction in the text also reflects the modern change of attitude towards women in sports that come out as 'lesbian' and 'gay'. Women's sport in the West has come a long way in terms of tolerance and acceptance of homosexuality. In the past, it was difficult for homosexual female athletes to come out, as it was scandalous which would impact their professional careers and commercial endorsements. For example, in the early 1980s, Billie Jean King and Martina Navratilova, two tennis champions, faced those consequences when

their stories became known to the public (Griffin 265). As a result, "LGBT coaches and athletes learned quickly that the way to survive in an overwhelmingly heterosexual male-dominated sports world was to adapt to the culture of the closet by hiding their sexual orientation" (266). Nowadays, however, the situation is different, "[...] when a woman athlete comes out as a lesbian, the public response is often indifferent, reflecting both a lack of interest in women's sports and an assumption that, given associations between female athleticism and lesbians, a woman athlete proclaiming she is gay is not news" (269–70). It is important to remember that the accepting attitude that makes football a safe space did not necessarily exist in the early stages of women's football, but the fiction here applies the "what if" logic to football history that resonates with the state of the game today. For example, in the 2023 Women's World Cup in Australia and New Zealand "roughly 13% of players in the 2023 Women's World Cup identify as LGBTQ+"(Weintraub). This is also what sets women's football apart from the men's game. In the men's game, a game considered masculine, it is almost unheard of for a male player to come out as gay.

Texts like this could be a source of comfort for a reader who finds themselves in similar circumstances as they might relate to these characters and their experiences of navigating their sexuality. According to Katherine Mason Cramer,

> For many LGBTQ YAL protagonists, sports provide a supportive community in which they can embody their full and true identities after coming out to teammates, coaches, friends, family, and teachers. These depictions of openness and inclusiveness are vital to disrupting homophobia and transphobia so readily apparent in some sports sites (43-44).

Therefore, the inclusion of lesbian and gay characters within these selected fictions and within the space the authors dedicated for the exploration of this theme, showcases examples of players who are exploring their sexual identity without any direct threat to their athletic prospects, or the fear of any labels.

Although the novels express tolerant views and a positive attitude toward non-heteronormative relationships, and attempt to normalise homosexuality through Polly, Clara, Lily Parr, Hettie, Flo, and Martha, they also risk reinforcing the stereotype that links female footballers with being lesbian/gay. This stereotype, which has been discussed earlier, is considered a factor that discourages women and girls from participating in sports. Therefore, the reception of those characters might vary, as not every female protagonist or influential female character in the novels who is gay or lesbian is necessarily an empowering figure. This dual impact is discussed in the article "Being an Athlete or Being a Girl: Selective Identities among Fictional Female Athletes Who play with the Boys":

> Fictional narratives can be transformative, shaping how readers understand, navigate, and imagine life in the everyday world. This transformation, however, can be a double-edged sword: fictional narratives can challenge the dominant narrative or reaffirm problematic positionings and do harm. Despite their potential to do so, our analysis reveals that not all novels about girls in sports achieve liberatory aims (Glenn and King-Watkins 291)

These fictional texts have the power to liberate young readers from societal norms and expectations, but also the capacity for reinforcing stereotypes that some try to escape.

6.4 The 'Problem' of Lily Parr

Lily Parr has arguably taken up most of the attention of historians and novelists who write about women's football in Britain. At the beginning of *Our Beautiful Game*, its author Lou Kuenzler explains how she attempts to mirror the life of Parr, one of the Dick, Kerr Ladies legends: "Through my central character Polly I have echoed the life of the famous footballer Lily Parr" (Kuenzler 9). Here, Parr is used as an of inspiration for the novel. By contrast, Eve Ainsworth chooses to keep Lily Parr's name and show this popular figure in action. Her legacy is also celebrated off the page, and perhaps the most notable recognition of her successful career is a statue of her that was unveiled in 2019 and has been displayed in the National Football Museum in Manchester since 2021, along with a gallery dedicated to her (Dunn, *'Unsuitable for Females'* 23). This coverage and celebration of Lily Parr indicates the

impact that her success has had on women's football but also begs the question, why is there such a fixation on Parr?

In part three of *'Unsuitable for Females': The Rise of The Lionesses and Women's Football in England*, 'The Myth,' Carrie Dunn sheds light on this question. In Dunn's view, Parr could be seen as a myth, "Essentially, the figure of Lily Parr - the woman and the footballer - has become a myth" (23). But the historian Jean Willams sees this as problematic because it is not fair to the other players: "We've all been party to that mythmaking - and I think it's hugely problematic, actually, [...] If you hand it all on Lily Parr and one personality you kind of make the others fade into the background" (24). Gail Newsham, a football player who played in the 1970s and was one of the first to document the history of the Dick, Kerr Ladies, also questions this focus on Parr: "'She's just been made into something that never existed,' she said. 'She was just an ordinary lass, a good player with a powerful shot in a very good team, and there were better players than her; it's just that she played longer than anybody else'" (21). However, in Dunn's opinion, whether or not Parr could be seen as a mythical character, she could be seen as a symbol: "Perhaps in the end Parr is a symbol for all Dick, Kerr Ladies and those forgotten women who played football in the first half of the 20th century" (23). Therefore, Parr, as a literary figure, is symbolic and the literary texts inspired by her tend to reinforce her "mythical" status rather than a true representation. Peter Burke describes the double-edged sword nature of literary interpretations of the past: "Literature might be described as both a friend and a foe of memory. On one side, texts record memories that might otherwise have been lost. On the other hand, they replace the original memories by something like myths" (21).

Parr has also been seen as an LGBTQ icon, which is a matter discussed and refuted continually by Steve Bolton and Jean Williams who both undermine the assumptions about Lily Parr's sexual identity, a pivotal aspect of Polly and Lily's character in the novels, as they

believe speculating about Parr's sexuality based on the fact she was unmarried and shared a home with another female is not a solid ground for such an assumption. Bolton and Williams assert "that many working-class women – single or widowed – were sharing their homes and creating lives together, splitting the costs of bills and accommodation" (Dunn, '*Unsuitable for Females*' 27). Therefore, "Parr's life and home set-up were far from unusual at the time" (22) so it could be problematic to assume such a living situation makes a person gay or lesbian. In the discussed fictions, and in real life, Parr's image is being drawn into the modern, dominant portrayal of the female footballer. Today, the figure of the woman footballer is often read through a lens of queerness or uncertainty. The prevailing question is no longer whether a particular player is straight or gay, as queerness has, arguably, become the assumed or expected status. Parr's family also weighed in on the subject, confirming the inaccuracy of any presumption about her sexual identity: "Parr's name has been attached to initiatives for lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people, a move that shocked her family, who maintain that she would not have described herself in any of those terms" (22). Yet even this should not be regarded as an authoritative account of Parr's history.

The attention these novels pay to the sexual identity of players like Parr could be seen as problematic as it takes, to a certain extent, precedence over the athletic identity of such characters. Bolton suggests that Parr should be remembered and celebrated "for being a tremendous sportswoman, being a very well-thought-of and caring nurse, and a loyal friend" rather than a member of the LGBTQ community, when there is very little evidence to prove it (Dunn, *'Unsuitable for Females'* 28). But this speculation about Parr's sexual identity is an aspect rooted in the perception of women's football. Women in football tend to have their sexuality questioned though it has nothing to do with their being as a footballer. Lily Parr remains a historic public figure and an icon in the history of women's football in Britian.

6.5 The Tomboy Figure

In his closing remarks at the 1999 Women's World Cup, then FIFA president Sepp Blatter declared that the "future of football is feminine" (Caudwell, "Gender, Feminism and Football Studies" 335). Blatter's use of "feminine" suggests that women and girls in football should embody certain notions of femininity. His subsequent comments reinforces a specific view of femininity tied to sexuality: "women should play in tighter shorts to attract more fans to the game" (Woodward 1112). These controversial statements highlight the sexism and misogyny ingrained in football and its fan culture as Jayne Caudwell explains in her article "Gender, Feminism and Football Studies" (330–31). Blatter's remarks reflect broader challenges that female athletes face under certain expectations. This notion or understanding of femininity is heavily present in the 1920s fiction, as illustrated earlier, and, in a way, echoes Blatter's vision of players being involved in a male-dominated sport while maintaining conventional standards of femininity. The twenty-first-century historical football fiction introduces a different type of football protagonist, by focusing on younger women and adolescents. 12-year-old Polly Nabb, 14-year-old Lily Dodd, and 12-year-old Martha break the conventional image of femininity and beauty in the context of balancing their roles in a masculine-oriented sport and the depiction of a traditionally feminine female. Martha, Polly, and Hettie also break the tradition of heterosexual relationships. Another way the fiction diverges from the 1920s fiction is through the representation of the tomboy. The particular focus here will be on Polly Nabb in *Our Beautiful Game* and Lily Dodd, the 14-year-old protagonist of *Lily and the Rockets*.

Reclaiming the Tomboy: The Body, Representation, and Identity (2022) cites the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of the tomboy figure as "a girl or young woman who acts or dresses in what is considered to be a boyish way, esp. one who likes rough or energetic activities conventionally more associated with boys" (Dymond et al. 1). It is

important to note here that the female protagonists in this part of the chapter are referred to as tomboys and not treated as "ladettes" a description that does not apply to them. Angela Smith in "Femininity Repackaged: Postfeminism and Ladette to Lady" draws the distinction between a tomboy and a ladette where she states, "the tomboy, after all, wants to *be* one of the boys; the ladette wants to *be attractive to* the boys" (155–56). Though the tomboy figure Polly is romantically interested in a female character, it still does not exclude her from the definition of a tomboy. Smith further adds to the definition of ladette as it is a heterosexual female displaying "laddish" behaviour such as "binge drinking and sexual promiscuity" (156). The two protagonists in question, Lily and Polly, lead conservative lives far from "binge drinking and sexual promiscuity". Therefore, it is safe to conclude the 'ladette' figure is absent from this fiction and the 'tomboy' is the most suitable term that fits more with the spirit of the time being evoked to define the characters in question.

The young female protagonists of *Lily and the Rockets* and *Our Beautiful Game* belong within this definition of a tomboy. It could also be seen as a break from the traditionally "pretty" female football protagonist of the early 1920s fiction. Michelle Ann Abate's *Tomboys: A Literary and Cultural History* suggests there are different possibilities of how to read the tomboy figure, but one way of perceiving the tomboy figure is as a way to 'critique' women's gender roles (xxiv). Through Lily's voice, the reader learns a great deal about how self-worth is tied to societal perceptions of femininity and beauty. This is particularly evident in the story with regard to her physical appearance. Lily's description of herself shows her lack of confidence in her looks because she does not seem to conform to certain societal expectations of the time which prioritise conventional standards of beauty in women's appearance and bodies: "I'm not a pretty girl, I know that. I'm too tall, too lanky, too all-over big. My shoulders are too wide, my chest's too flat, my hands are like shovels, my hair's too red and too wiry and there's much too much of it" (Stevens 86). The

exaggeration in her descriptions by the constant use of "too" creates an image of a young female who feels completely alienated from the femininity defined by the standards of the society she lives in. This lack of confidence is not entirely generated from within; it is evident in the narrative that she faced bullying at school from her peers because of her unconventional appearance. For example, she gets picked on at school because of the size of her shoes, "[...] I was crying because I was cold and the other girls had been teasing me, making comments about the size of my feet and how I had to go to school in my dad's boots (which wasn't true at the time actually, I was only about seven)" (Stevens 19–20). Another example is noted in the streets where she is harassed by the boys because of her height: "'Oi! Lanky legs! What's the weather like up there?' [...] 'I'd give you a kiss if I had a ladder!'" (19–20). Such examples highlight how women, even at a very young age, are often under surveillance and subjected to public judgement of their appearance.

The physical descriptions of Lily and how other characters perceive her, creates an internal conflict for Lily as she questions her self-worth which impacts her relationships with other characters. Lily refuses to send a picture of herself to Jack, the soldier on the front line with whom she is corresponding, out of the fear of rejection based on her looks. She is also thoroughly aware of how he might be alienated by the idea of her playing football:

> If Jack saw what I looked like, he'd never want to write to me again, and I didn't think I could bear it. So I wasn't going to send a photograph even if I had one, which I hadn't. And I couldn't tell him what I was really like either, that I probably loved football as much as he did. I thought about what Dora Crawford had said. *'The boys don't like it, you know. Girls acting like men, running around getting all dirty and hot. Showing their knees! It's not what I call ladylike'* (Stevens 86–87).

Lily's internal dialogue reflects how deeply these societal orthodoxies affect her sense of self. Therefore, Lily feels compelled to hide parts of herself, both her appearance and her passion for football, to fit into the image of a more traditionally feminine, desirable woman, embodied by her friend Amy:

> I made up my mind there and then that I wouldn't let on to Jack that I loved football, and I certainly wouldn't let him know that I played. The girl Jack Darling would want to write to, I decided wouldn't be someone like me, a not-pretty girl, five feet ten in her socks with feet so big they fit into her dad's football boots. It would be someone like Amy. Little and sweet, with curling fair hair and a nose that wrinkled up when she laughed. So I decided to be her (Stevens 87).

The author is concerned with how Lily's inability to recognise her own worth, along with the pressure to conform to traditional ideas of femininity, prevents her from being true to herself and to others. This pressure does not just limit her personal expression but also reinforces a broader belief that girls and women who pursue sports typically seen as male-dominated lack conventional feminine beauty. The author critiques how these norms restrict female identity and expression. Readers may understand this as a commentary on the social consequences of rigid gender roles and how they affect individual confidence and authenticity.

Polly Nabb's character also challenges traditional or conventional feminine standards that were set in the 1920s novels as she is described as "[...] tall for her age, especially for a girl, as people never tired of telling her," (Kuenzler 14) which immediately aligns her physicality with male standards. The emphasis on Polly's shared physical traits with her brother, Joe — "They had the same wild black hair, deep-set grey eyes and big, wide mouths" (17) — suggests an erasure of the traditional feminine ideal that dominated earlier fiction, where women were often portrayed in a graceful manner. In addition, she is described later on in the novel as "physically strong" (85) an attribute that challenges conventional representations of female bodies. Both fictions present the woman footballer as a figure who exists uneasily within dominant gender expectations. In doing so, they introduce a form of counter-normativity, positioning her as a challenge to conventional ideas of femininity and social belonging.

In addition, Polly's physicality and involvement in football makes the vicar, Mr. Grave, describe her in a reference letter as "lacking the niceties of the female sex," and "on

the very edge of running wild" (Kuenzler 85), which reflects societal discomfort with women who defy expected gender roles, particularly in physical spaces traditionally dominated by men. This brings us once again to the Foucauldian reading established in Chapter Five, reinforcing the idea that biopower operates through institutions such as the church, which extend mechanisms of control over bodies and identities. The repeated failure to conform to these gendered expectations, such as "Polly couldn't cry. She never cried" (32) positions her as a character who resists emotional vulnerability, or at least making a show of such vulnerability. Polly's physical strength accompanied with the lack of emotional display can be read as gestures of defiance towards narrow depictions of femininity. This portrayal could be seen as a shift in cultural expectations surrounding women's roles, suggesting that traits like strength and emotional control are not inherently masculine but can be part of a more liberated concept of femininity.

All the football protagonists, whether discussed in this chapter or Chapter Five, could be associated with the tomboy figure to a degree, simply due to them playing football. However, the main focus was on Rebecca Steven's *Lily and the Rockets* and Lou Kuenzler's *Our Beautiful Game,* as their protagonists, Lily and Polly, strongly possess the characteristics of the tomboy figure whether in their physical description, football playing or general behaviour. Highlighting this type of protagonist is necessary as it is a common form of representation that showcases the side of football where the female characters' existence and behaviours could be understood or examined through the impact of a masculine sport and how it contributes to the image of the female football protagonist.

6.6 Conclusion

In the first part of the chapter, I looked at the representations of the protagonists contributing to the war effort. They critique the shortcomings of the government within the context of the First World War and raise money for medical services through football, utilising the game for

the common good. Later, this chapter illustrated that novels set in early twentieth century Britain and those written almost 100 years later possess similarities. The main similarities lie in both eras showing institutional attempts to control the protagonists' physical activity and reveal the biased attitudes and stereotypes regarding women in general, and specifically women in football, who have asserted agency in spaces not traditionally reserved for them.

The second part of the chapter examined novels aimed at a younger audience. Through the protagonists' experiences, a new type of protagonist appears with the categorisation including lesbian and tomboy characters. The twenty-first-century historical fiction is unique in its own way and communicates different experiences of the female footballer. Unlike the fiction of the 1920s, these novels downplay the feminine representations of the protagonist and introduce LGBTQ characters, in this, it radically contrasts with the men's game. The chapter also looked at the representation of Lily Parr as a dominant historical figure across texts. Moreover, the chapter was analysed within the wider theoretical approaches of sports feminism, with particular focus on Heidi Eng's understanding of queer theory.

Chapter Seven: The Football Protagonist in Film (1981 and 2002)

7.1 Introduction

Building on the analysis of the fictions published during the periods 1921-1923 and 2019-2022 in Chapters Five and Six, this chapter examines two key cinematic representations of the woman footballer in post-ban Britain: *Gregory's Girl* (1981) and *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002). Written and directed by the Glaswegian Bill Forsyth, *Gregory's Girl* was released in 1981, ten years after the ban was lifted on women's football in England (it should be noted that in Scotland, the ban was not imposed until 1948 but was only gradually lifted throughout the 1970s). *Bend It Like Beckham*, directed by Sikh Punjabi British Gurinder Chadha, came out in 2002 as British pop culture was enjoying something of a rebirth as "Cool Britannia", and just over thirty years after the ban was lifted. Both films represent female footballers, but do so through the presentation of distinctive contexts: in *Gregory's Girl*, Dorothy (Dee Hepburn) tackles sexism to fight for a place on the boys' team in suburban Glasgow, whereas for Jess (Parminder Nagra) growing up in London's West Asian community in *Bend It Like Beckham*, a girls' team already exists but the complexities concerning how to be a female footballer are compounded by the complexities of fitting into British society as a second generation immigrant. In their own way, both films show not only yet more versions of the image of the female footballer, but the struggle to see her through something that approximates a lens of her own.

This chapter investigates how female footballers see themselves, and are seen, in *Gregory's Girl* and *Bend It Like Beckham*, using sports feminism and the broader context of feminist film theory as its critical framework. Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze is used to examine how female footballers are framed within each cinematic work. Additionally, Jayne Caudwell's framework on gender and sexuality that stems from queer theory informs my analysis of a possible queer-coded reading of the protagonists. This chapter argues that

Dorothy in *Gregory's Girl* manoeuvres and attempts to control the male gaze, and ultimately redirects the gaze at play. On the other hand, *Bend It Like Beckham* largely avoids framing its protagonists, Jess and Jules (Keira Knightley), through the male gaze, allowing the female protagonist more room to claim agency. Nevertheless, the protagonists do not fully escape this gaze, as it is manifested in the mothers of the protagonists.

As we live increasingly in a "society of the spectacle" (Debord xi), as Guy Debord called it, the woman footballer as realised on screen is much more thoroughly present, at least visually. The image of the woman footballer is based in a fundamental call to imagination, both historical and otherwise. Even in the early days of women's football, curiosity about female players was often shaped by expectations regarding their appearance, including what they wore, how much of their body was exposed, and how aggressively they behaved in a contact sport. The participants were all judged by how "ladylike" or "unladylike" this footballer image fit with the idea of early 20th century womanhood. But this image of the female footballer, as the fiction covered so far reveals, is not a fixed image; it keeps shifting due to the political and social changes surrounding this image. Therefore, so far, the female footballer is not one thing, but many: a worker, a rebel, a suffragette, a fighter, a role model and an athlete. Though her representation continues to change, she remains constrained by expectations mainly shaped by society. So, the question remains, what has truly evolved in her representation as a footballer? What does the cinematic depiction of this character reveal that is less recognisable in the prose fiction?

It might be suggested that perhaps the image is not changing after all, but rather that each version builds upon the previous one and should be viewed with a sense of connection to the perspective of the other. This realises a cumulative image of the footballer throughout time, in all its historical complexity. However, the issue remains how we must now interpret this image in its current moment of existence rather than fixating on an image that has

historically been controlled by patriarchy. The film *Bend It Like Beckham* achieves a stage in this process. It takes the image of the women footballer to another level of significance. Many of the prose fictions positioned the player within the historical context of the popularisation of the game and built towards understanding the reality of why and how the women's game has been slow in its progression, Dorothy in *Gregory's Girl* marks the beginning of the comeback. A bold move needed to be taken to open doors for female participation in football starting with Dorothy's school, but for Jess and Jules in *Bend It Like Beckham* the same questions of a fundamental right-to-play are not so present. As access and opportunity are more available, they can take an increasingly optimistic view of the possibilities of the game. The following part of the chapter will explore how Dorothy, Jess, and Jules mark their presence.

Both *Gregory's Girl* and *Bend It Like Beckham* can be categorised within the sports film genre, which has historically been a means of reflecting broader societal attitudes toward many issues including gender roles. Sean Crosson in his book *Sport and Film* (2013), highlights how Laura Mulvey views how women are portrayed and depicted in the genre: "[W]omen have featured principally in the genre [sports film] as either beautiful, inspirational, and often sexualized, figures for male protagonists or untrustworthy exploitative femme fatales" (Crosson 136). However, with the progression of the genre, particularly after the 1970s, the representation of women began to shift. Crosson attributes this change partly to the influence of the growing women's movement and women's increasing visibility in public and professional spaces:

> From the 1970s onwards women began to feature more frequently in prominent roles in sports films. Indeed, these women now appeared in roles and possessed qualities perceived historically as masculine, such as authority, strength, aggression, force and intellect (141).

This part of the chapter further exemplifies the evolution of this role by exploring how Dorothy, Jess, and Jules are characterised and perceived on screen in their role as aspiring football players.

7.2 *Gregory's Girl* (1981) and *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002) in Context

Gregory's Girl (1981)

In the 1970s and 1980s, Scottish filmmakers began gaining recognition and bringing audiences to the cinema (Alastair Gray 139) but it was "*Gregory's Girl*, which really brought Scottish cinema to mainstream British audiences" (Martin-Jones 38). The film was remarkable for its unexpected success, given its modest state-funded production. It resonated with audiences through its familiar comedic style while engaging with themes of agency, gender, sexuality, and sports within a context of social and political change. Despite its low budget of £200,000, it grossed around £25 million around the world (Brocklehurst). It was nominated for several BAFTAs and won the award for Best Screenplay (Cullen et al. 98). Set in Scotland, the story revolves around a school football team that desperately needs a new goal scorer. Dorothy, the main female character in the film and who proves to be ambitious, talented, and strong-willed, trials for the team and she manages to secure a spot. Her success changes the norm of an all-male football team at her school. As the film progresses, Gregory Underwood (John Gordon Sinclair), the former striker and goalkeeper for the school's team, falls in love with Dorothy and builds the courage to ask her out on a date. While she accepts the invitation, Dorothy is seen as matchmaker as well as a playmaker, as in the last part of the film she stands Gregory up but simultaneously sets him up with Susan (Clare Grogan), another girl from their school. The film ends with Gregory happily finding love with Susan, but only because of Dorothy's choreography of the whole situation. The sheer power and influence invested in the calm persona of Dorothy suggests that the film's significance

extends beyond the progressive gender politics present in the female protagonist challenging societal and gender expectations.

Arguably, the popularity of *Gregory's Girl* contributed to paving the way for later films, which also depict women footballers, like *Bend It Like Beckham.* It is also important to contextualise the film within the shifting political scene in Scotland through the activism of the Women's Liberation Movement, the lifting of the ban on women's football, and the emergence of the idea of the "new town" in urban planning. The Women's Liberation Movement, also referred to as 'second wave feminism', "is commonly taken to be the upsurge in feminist activism and other feminist practices, agency and organisation in Europe, North America and many other developed countries between the mid 1960s and the mid 1980s" (Bruley and Forster 698). Sarah Browne describes the research done on the movement in Britain in general as "slow" (2) and says, "there has been little written about the history of the WLM in Scotland," but this does not mean it was not strongly active (178). The sustained efforts and advocacy of the movement in Britain, including Scotland, led to profound changes in women's lives during the 1970s, resulting in the passage of three significant laws: the Equal Pay Act (1970), the Sex Discrimination Act (1975), and the Domestic Violence Act (1976) (2). The Women's Liberation Movement and the lifting of the ban on women's football could be seen as linked to one another. The Scottish Women's Football Association had been set up in 1972 despite the ban that was formally lifted by the Scottish Football Association in 1974 (Skillen et al. 56–57). Moreover, David Martin-Jones describes the location of *Gregory's Girl* as "a 'fresh', regional Scottish setting that provided an alternative to the mythical Scotland of the Kailyard, Tartanry or Clydesideism" (46). In addition, "the 'newness' of the new town environment gelled with the 'newness' of the film's gender politics" (45). *Gregory's Girl* shows a protagonist who is politically aware of her rights,

Football, as the chapter will later demonstrate, empowers Dorothy and allows her to exercise her rights in a modern setting. She has the law on her side.

***Bend It Like Beckham* (2002)**

Just as *Gregory's Girl* explores the particular dynamics of a specifically Scottish situation but also communicates effectively beyond that apparent border, *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002) explores cultural, racial, and gender expectations through the story of two talented 18-year-old footballers living in west London, Jesminder (Jess) and Jules. Jess, a British Indian girl from a traditional Punjabi Sikh family, struggles to balance her parents' expectations of academic success and marriage within their community with her passion for football. Jules, a white British girl, faces her own challenges, as her mother worries about her femininity and sexuality; anxieties that are prompted by her love for football. Despite these pressures, Jess and Jules bond on the same girls' football team, Hounslow Harriers, and share a dream of playing professionally. However, their friendship faces a challenge when both develop feelings for their Irish coach, Joe (Jonathan Rhys Meyers). This romantic rivalry ultimately brings them closer, as Jules comes to accept the relationship between Joe and Jess. It also shows a return of sorts to the tendency of the 1920s fictions to use a heteronormative romance plot as a form of control, although it arguably is not central to the film. By contrast, Dorothy escapes being implicated in such a plot altogether, ironically by taking over responsibility for the weaving of it. The player becomes the playmaker. Ultimately it is not romance that represents success for Jess, but a career path as a footballer. By the end of the film, both Jess and Jules earn sports scholarships to play soccer at Santa Clara University in the United States and achieve their dreams.

The film was not only a huge success in the UK, but also in the USA. Although Timothy F. Grainey describes the success of the film in the States as a "surprise" when released in Spring 2003 (grossing forty-three million dollars by the end of the year (xix)), it

can be countered that it very much was not a "surprise" to anyone who understood the phenomenon of women's football in North America. It was released at a time when the USA was seen as a hub for female players who wanted to pursue football professionally or semi-professionally, as it was globally considered "the most desirable destination in the game," attracting international talents (John Harris 54). One of the notable examples who pursued football in the USA through a soccer scholarship was England player, Kelly Smith, who played for Seton Hall University (54). A similar narrative is evident in the film *Bend It Like Beckham,* in which Jess and Jules, had a dream of landing a soccer scholarship in the States in the hope of getting paid to play, while at the same time shedding light on the lack of this form of opportunity in the UK (54). The film was also nominated for several awards and won the British Comedy Award for Best Comedy Film, Best Sports Movie ESPY Award, and GLAAD Media Award for Outstanding Film (*Bend It Like Beckham (2002) - Awards - IMDb*). After the huge success of the film, Gurinder Chadha became a household name, and in June 2006 she was awarded an Order of the British Empire in the Queen's Birthday honours list (Chakraborty 157).

There are several factors that could be attributed to the film's success, including how the film embraces celebrity culture. David Beckham, who is referred to in the title of the film, is clearly seen as an inspiring figure and role model in the film, but also the film capitalised on his fame. The now-retired midfielder is known for his precise free kicks and ""bending" the ball at speed around the opponents' defensive wall. The film deploys this emblematically as a mark of excellence, an aspirational target for anyone seeking to become a professional footballer" (Garratt and Piper 104). Besides David Beckham the football player, the film, as David M. Carter suggests, "[...]furthered the image that Beckham was a man who wanted to spread the goodwill of the game worldwide to those of both genders and all walks of life" (72). In *The Beckham Experiment: How the World's Most Famous Athlete Tried to Conquer*

America, Grant Wahl demonstrates how the "key to Beckham's popularity was his ability to function as a one-size-fits-all vessel for his fans' hopes and dreams" (31). For example, on the topic of homosexuality, he took pride in being considered a gay icon and even appeared on the cover of *Attitude,* the British gay magazine. In addition, in a male-dominant sport that is considered highly masculine, Beckham embraced his feminine side as he openly once shared, "I'm quite sure of my feminine side, and I've not got a problem with that at all. These days it's the norm, and it should be. Everyone's different, everyone's got their thing" (31). This also summons again the idea of beauty, and that Beckham represented how a footballer could both excel in the sport and inhabit a role of aesthetic perfection. The artist Sam Taylor-Wood's portrait of Beckham, "David Beckham (David)" gave particular stress to how Beckham's version of beauty was practically epicene, taking him into a liminal zone of gender. [16]

In other respects, Beckham openly takes pride in his Jewish heritage and when it comes to race, a British TV show considered him "an honorary black man" instead of being accused of cultural appropriation after his "cornrows and chunky jewellery" style (Wahl 31). In addition, he is a great supporter of women's football: he established The David Beckham Academy in London and Los Angeles for both girls and boys, as it is a stated priority for him to get girls involved in sports (31). The film was embedded in celebrity culture in other ways too. The Spice Girls, a popular music band in the 1990s has a close connection to David Beckham as his wife Victoria Adams (later Victoria Beckham) is one of the five girls (Posh Spice), additionally, in the film a reference is made to Sporty Spice (Melanie Chisholm). Their mention/presence in the film is significant, as the band was, and remains, a major influence in popularising the concept of 'Girl Power', which gained widespread recognition

[16]David Beckham ('David') by Sam Taylor-Johnson (Sam Taylor-Wood)
https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw73998/David-Beckham-David

in the 1990s, as a cultural movement which is also linked with third-wave feminism (Danesi 130). Michelle S. Bae argues that with the launch of the Spice Girls, "the popular cultural version of girl power has redirected the representation of girlhood from a strong, proactive, smart heroine to a worshiper of feminine beauty and heterosexuality" (28). The Girl Power cultural phenomenon was also criticised for being "too focused on sexualization, especially of younger girls, since it encourages females to be as sexy as they desire, without reprobation or censure" (130). Other feminists also criticised the movement for "the blatant commercialization of Girl Power" and the money-generating aspect of it (Mitchell and Reid-Walsh 313). *Bend It Like Beckham* is not immersed in these values but can be understood as part of the Girl Power phenomenon in the way it foregrounds female friendship and solidarity through football.

7.3 (De)centering the Male Gaze

In 1975, Laura Mulvey published a 'groundbreaking' essay titled "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", where she discusses various issues in mainstream Hollywood cinema and is most famously credited with introducing and developing the concept of the "male gaze" (Hollinger 24). In the essay Mulvey argues, "[...] pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female" (Mulvey 62). She suggests Hollywood cinema presents a viewing experience that is inherently masculine, where female characters are depicted primarily as objects to satisfy male desire (Hollinger 24). However, according to Mulvey, the woman's portrayal is not just as an erotic object for the male protagonist but also for the audience's gaze. She splits the 'masculine' gaze into three, "the gaze of the camera, the gaze of the male protagonist within the film and the gaze of the cinema spectators – map on to each other, leading inevitably to the objectification of women" (Gill 105). This is where critics argue that Mulvey failed to acknowledge the female spectator in forms other than either identifying with the male gaze or being submissive to it (105). One of this chapter's

main arguments centres on the tensions between these films' groundbreaking portrayals of women and, at the same time, the extent of reliance on regressive, sexualised representations. It explores how this contradiction is central to what the films both explicitly and implicitly communicate about gender politics.

This male gaze is certainly present in both *Gregory's Girl* and *Bend It Like Beckham,* but to different degrees, and it has a different impact on each of the protagonists and how their growth and development is perceived. In this chapter I argue that in *Gregory's Girl*, Dorothy is framed within the male gaze from the beginning, but she finds ways to negotiate a way out of this gaze by manoeuvring within the power relations that are at play, ultimately redirecting this gaze without fully controlling it, which gives her a significant degree of agency, even if it is not total. In *Bend It Like Beckham*, I argue that the film rejects the overt male gaze in terms of how Jess and Jules are represented, but its influence manifests still, primarily through the anxieties and expectations expressed by the protagonists' mothers, Mrs. Bhamra (Shaheen Khan) and Mrs. Paxton (Juliet Stevenson). The romantic subplot involving their coach, Joe, introduces further complexity to how the male gaze operates within the narrative.

Before Dorothy is ever introduced to the viewer of *Gregory's Girl*, the first scene of the film establishes a portrayal of women that appears to underscore how they are conventionally viewed in a masculine society. The film begins with a group of five adolescent boys, including the Gregory of the film's title, peeking through a window as a nurse undresses after returning from work, briefly appearing topless. This moment exemplifies Laura Mulvey's concept in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", where she argues that "women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness" (Mulvey 63). The nurse's portrayal as an object of visual pleasure reinforces her role as a

spectacle for the male characters, emphasising her lack of agency. John Berger's assertion in *Ways of Seeing* that "men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at" (47), further highlights the gendered power dynamics at play, positioning the male characters as active observers while reducing the female nurse to an object of their gaze. In addition, we can cite Berger's distinction between being naked and being nude "To be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself" (53) shows how the nurse's nudity in this scene is not a representation of her authentic self, but rather an image constructed for male consumption. This opening scene sets a tone of objectification in the narrative, aligning with Mulvey's and Berger's critiques of how women are depicted in visual media as passive objects of visual consumption. Yet even here, the film appears to begin the work of taking issue with what it appears to have established. After the voyeuristic teenagers have left the scene, two younger teenage boys appear and offer a withering verdict on the excitement of the others: "A lot of fuss over a bit of tit, eh?" This remark does not dispel the idea that the male gaze is prevalent here, but it attaches it to a kind of matter-of-factness that takes it out of the domain of fantasy and into reality. If anything, it serves to show how Dorothy and other women are doubly framed, within both fantasy and reality, and that they are fundamentally similar in how they place women within containment.

Yet when the action cuts immediately to show Dorothy, it already offers a contrasting image to how the nurse appeared. The former is seen in a domestic space, narrowly observed through a window at night, and being watched by male characters of different ages. Her privacy is open to all their gazes. Dorothy, on the other hand, is fully tracksuited and running in an open field in daylight, with a view of the town in the background and no one else in the scene. The second time she appears in the film, she is still running; however, now over a bridge at what seems to be sunrise before heading to school. In a later scene, she is alone in

the field again, this time training with a football. Unlike the nurse, who is being looked at and "trapped" by their gaze, Dorothy is in movement and apparently free from surveillance, apart from the film camera itself. Significantly, the camera has to move to keep her in view, and ultimately, she runs out of the shot. In one way this symbolises a new dawn where Dorothy refuses the confined and objectified image of the sexualised woman. She is viewed through athleticism rather than eroticism.

Yet Dorothy is not simply free. She is subjected to the voice of the male gaze when she and her friend arrive at school. A group of male gardeners whistle and make comments such as "Hello darling, all right there darling?", their eyes following the girls as they pass. Dorothy appears indifferent to their remarks; she neither responds to nor resists their attention. Her lack of reaction is arguably a powerful gesture, allowing her to retain control in the face of objectification. This scene marks the first moment in the film where Dorothy shifts from being free of the male gaze to becoming its object and reminds the viewer of what she has to contend with. In this instance, her choice to ignore the male gaze sets the tone for how she continues to navigate it throughout the film. Significantly, however, when the scene with the gardeners occurs, Dorothy is no longer in her tracksuit but in her school uniform. The conformity associated with her outfit in turn produces the heteronormative conformity of the catcalls of the gardeners, as if they are simply programmed to produce them on cue.

Arguably, the male gaze is at its most intense and powerful when Gregory begins to obsess romantically about Dorothy. Her encounter with Gregory happens through the school's football team, as she takes part in a trial to replace him. The team is portrayed as incompetent and in desperate need of a skilled goalscorer, which prompts Dorothy to insist on joining the all-male squad. Despite the initial resistance she faces, she defies the de facto rule of no female players and ultimately secures a place on the team. Her first interaction is with the coach, Mr. Menzies (Jake D'Arcy), when she insists on trialling for the team: "The

advert said, ‘talented players.’ It didn’t say boys only. You’re not allowed anyway. I want a trial.” As she discusses her intention to join the team, she begins to remove her tracksuit. Notably, Mr. Menzies keeps his gaze fixed on her face, suggesting a refusal of overt sexualisation in the moment. Once she is on the field, the camera focuses on the ball and her movement with it, framing her as a footballer and subject in motion, reminiscent briefly of how Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno’s documentary shows Zinedine Zidane (*Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait*) in their documentary *Zidane: A Twenty-First Century Portrait,* rather than as an objectified and static body. The attention remains on her skill, and the other boys are shown reacting positively to her ability. They are impressed with her performance on the field, yet Gregory cannot agree, given his libidinous interest in Dorothy and the fact that she is a direct threat to him. He focuses on her in a sexualised manner rather than recognising her as a player. While watching her, he repeats, “She is gorgeous… she is absolutely gorgeous,” and his lip-biting and facial expressions emphasise his physical attraction to her. This contrast highlights the tension in the film between Dorothy’s athletic identity and her positioning within the male gaze. In one sense, it shows that Dorothy’s ability as a footballer is such that it does allow for the male gaze to be suspended, but it also shows that it will not be eradicated entirely.

Although the film is heavily centred around the male gaze, Dorothy is not entirely portrayed as a passive character and asserts, as demonstrated before, agency in when and how she responds to masculine control. After joining the team, Dorothy demonstrates her athletic talent by helping the team score and win in one of the matches. By scoring a goal, she instantly alters how others see her; even players from the opposing team rush to congratulate and kiss her, a scene that shows the kind of havoc that Dorothy is causing in masculine perception. The sexualisation of Dorothy by Gregory’s friend Andy (Robert Buchanan) becomes confused in the aftermath with other forms of admiration. At first, he had expressed

how he was disgusted by a woman playing football, but also then says “What a goal! What a girl! Yeah, she got a nice pair of legs as well, eh?” admiring her physical appearance. On the other hand, Gregory, who considered Dorothy a ‘modern woman’, is disgusted by the reaction to her scoring and the kisses she received. The reaction of Gregory on the celebration: “Look at that, it’s disgusting. That’s perverse and on a football field, with kids watching. Come on! There is a football game to be played. That sort of thing gives football a bad name. That is disgusting! Oh man oh.” Gregory’s jealousy is sparked by the attention Dorothy receives, the type of attention he is excluded from. He turned into a reactionary scold as the male gaze plays out before him, while Dorothy seems to embrace it, responding with ease and even enjoyment. Yet while her reaction is part of a spontaneous team celebration, the opposing players take advantage of the situation and join in the celebration by kissing her. Yet for Dorothy, arguably, the moment represents more than flattery: it is a moment of inclusion, a ‘seal of acceptance’ from the group. That said, this also can be seen in an entirely other way: male footballers may well kiss one another when they celebrate a goal, but only if they are from the same team. When all the players assume the right to kiss Dorothy, it summons the image again of Rubiales assuming he was entitled to kiss Jenni Hermosa at the World Cup without her consent. In this context, Gregory might be right, even if his motives are entirely selfish. He does not want others to kiss Dorothy because he wants the sole privilege.

While Dorothy is positioned as a potential agent of change by joining the boys’ football team and challenging gender norms, her agency is complicated by how she is framed within the story. She appears to exert some control, particularly when she subtly redirects Gregory’s romantic attention towards Susan, implying that she is not simply present to fulfil his desires. Her role remains limited; her inner thoughts are never fully explored, and she does not have many long speeches. As viewers, we never learn from Dorothy what her next

move is, and at points in the film she is largely mediated through male perspectives. For example, the circulation and sale of her photographs among male students further reinforces her objectification, raising questions about how much autonomy she truly possesses. Although she may represent the beginning of greater female participation in football, her portrayal is still shaped primarily by how others, specifically male characters, see and respond to her. Her perceived empowerment, then, may stem more from the way the film constructs her image than from any meaningful expression of self-determination. She seems to embody what it means to want to play football in a world that offers few facilities or support for girls, breaking barriers in a way that might inspire those who follow. Yet, as her story is told more through the lens of male desire than female ambition, the viewer is always left with a sense of the weight of what Dorothy has to resist.

Bend It Like Beckham reflects the power of the male gaze in another form, through its influence upon the mother figures in the film, as Mrs. Bhamra and Mrs. Paxton (Paula), are depicted as overly concerned with how their daughters appear to men as prospective partners. The main act of surveillance comes from the two mothers, who push their daughters to meet gender expectations that appeal to the male gaze, reflecting an internalised sense of its influence. Jess and Jules become aware of this and push back against it, unlike in *Gregory's Girl*, where Dorothy literally tried to run past it. Jess and Jules are not largely objectified in the film, despite the attempts by their mothers to feminise them. Mulvey's male gaze theory remains relevant here, but not absolutely. The gaze is not the dominant mode of framing, which at first could suggest progress in how female athletic characters are represented; but the mother figures keep it alive in a kind of vestigial form, functioning as enforcers or insinuators of traditional cultural and gender norms, attempting to shape their daughters according to socially sanctioned roles. In response, the daughters assert agency and reclaim power over their choices, pushing back against imposed expectations. Football becomes a

central means through which they challenge gender roles, navigate cultural identity, and build relationships rooted in friendship and romance, ultimately allowing them to form an image of what it means to be young, female, and, in Jess' case, culturally hybrid in a contemporary British setting.

Both Mrs. Bhamra and Mrs. Paxton share the general attitude or belief that football is more than just a sport, it is a potential obstacle which could stop their daughters from attracting a suitable partner. Despite this shared concern, each mother's perspective is shaped by her own distinct fears and cultural influences. Mrs. Paxton, Jules's mother, blames her husband for encouraging Jules to play football because she views it as a male activity, insisting that a girl with a woman's figure should not participate. Her concerns centre on her daughter's appearance, fearing that building muscle will make her less appealing to men: "When are you going to realize you have a daughter with breasts, not a son? No boy would want to go out with a girl who has bigger muscles than him [...] Honey, all I am saying is, there is a reason why Sporty Spice is the only one of them without a boyfriend." As a result, Paula tries to make her daughter appeal to the male gaze and attempts to do so by what Gamal Abdel-Shehid and Nathan Kalman-Lamb describe in "Multiculturalism, Gender and *Bend it Like Beckham*" as efforts to "feminize" her daughter, which Mrs. Bhamra also attempts to do (149). This is demonstrated when Mrs. Paxton takes Jules bra shopping; she tries to convince Jules to buy a push-up bra that would accentuate her femininity and sexual appeal while Jules opts for a more comfortable and functional option (149). This scene reflects the mother's embodiment of the male gaze's influence on women's self-presentation while Jules's choice assures her autonomy over her body and choices. It also stems from the mother's fear that her daughter might be/become a lesbian or be perceived as one: "Women who are flat-chested, physically and well-muscled stand more at risk of being labelled deviant

or lesbian than women who conform to dominant ideas of femininity" (Hargreaves, *Sporting Females* 305).

The major struggle for Jess is gaining the freedom to pursue her passion for football, a pursuit that clashes with her family's expectations that she finds a suitable husband, get married and continue her education. The film highlights the restrictions she faces in personal relationships, such as the expectation to date only Indian boys of the same faith, while navigating the unspoken but rigid boundaries against relationships with white or Muslim men that her family's culture demands. Through these conflicts, Jess's story encapsulates the tension of honouring tradition while seeking self-fulfilment in a multicultural environment: "Jess's betweenness of cultures is emblematic of the immigrant experience. She seeks to negotiate an identity that combines ancestral culture and the culture of the new homeland, occupying what Homi Bhabha (1990, 9) has termed *third space*" (Algeo 136–37). Mrs. Bhamra's worries stem from a collective cultural concern, in that she is more worried about what future in-laws might think of Jess's passion for football: "What family will want their daughter-in-law to run around kicking footballs all day but not know how to make round chapati? […] No more football." For Mrs. Bhamra, marriage, cooking, and impressing in-laws are the priorities for her daughter's future. Jess's mother insists that her daughter dress in traditional feminine attire, learn to cook, and prioritise finding a husband. This reflects the internalised belief that a woman's value is tied to her ability to fulfil such expectations.

However, while *Bend It Like Beckham* seems less focused on the male gaze compared to *Gregory's Girl*, it does not eliminate it entirely and what further complicates the portrayal of the male gaze in the film is the character of Joe, the coach. Throughout the trials, training sessions, and matches, Joe consistently demonstrates professionalism in his interactions with Jess and Jules. His supportive behaviour as a coach seems to suggest that a different form of male gaze might be at work, though, and that while conventionally control was expressed

through ideas of sexualisation, now it might be athleticism. This is evident in Jess's initial discomfort about wearing shorts due to a burn scar on her leg, a perceived imperfection that reflects the influence of internalised beauty ideals such as those expressed by her mother. However, with the encouragement of her male coach, Jess learns to embrace her body and challenge these conventional standards. However, during the trip to Germany, the film brings the mothers' internalised beliefs to the forefront. On a night out, Jess appears transformed, as if she had decided to dress for the male gaze. Her hair is down; she wears makeup, a revealing top, and a skirt. The camera lingers, showing her from her feet up to her face, deliberately contrasting this glamorous look with her usual image as a footballer: boots, shorts, t-shirt, hair up, no make-up. This moment catches Joe's attention, and he is visibly struck as he looks her up and down, marking a shift from a professional, sports-focused perspective to one that can be interpreted as the male gaze. This moment also marks the change of Joe's position from a professional coach to a "figure of desire" and confirms the heterosexual narrative in the film (Caudwell, "*Girlfight* and *Bend It Like Beckham*" 261). In addition, by appearing in this 'feminine' way, Jess, consciously or not, is responding to "the pressure to display heterosexual signs – defined as 'compulsory heterosexuality – [which is] most powerfully applied in traditional male sports, where women most dreaded the stigma of muscularity and implied lesbianism" (Hargreaves, *Heroines of Sport* 135). Ironically, while Mrs. Bhamra opposes Jess playing football and is deeply concerned about her falling for a white boy, this display of femininity is exactly what she hopes for her daughter. As mentioned before, for Mrs. Bhamra, the ideal would be a daughter who is not into football, who embodies traditional feminine qualities, and knows how to make round chapati, a clear contrast to the image of a footballer. The male gaze evidently functions differently in each film and has a distinct impact on character depiction.

7.4 Access and Opportunity in the Post-Ban Era

The development of women's football has been fundamentally influenced by intersecting forces, including rules imposed by football authorities and the intricate forms of discrimination related to both gender and, as *Bend It Like Beckham* reveals, race. The fictional texts covered in this dissertation, including both early 1920s fiction and twenty-first-century narratives, are rooted in the history of post-World War One Britain. [17] They reflect the societal and political changes brought by the war, particularly on the lives of women, and both *Gregory's Girl* (1981) and *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002), are set in Britain. Yet it is necessary to draw a distinction between the different associations that govern football in the setting of each film. While *Bend It Like Beckham* takes place in England, where the English Football Association famously banned women's football in 1921, *Gregory's Girl* is set in Scotland and governed by the Scottish Football Association. Notably, although the SFA did not impose an official ban in 1921, it later restricted women's football in 1949 (Skillen et al. 56). The ban was formally lifted by the Scottish Football Association in 1974 (56). This distinction in football governance lays the groundwork for understanding the contexts in which these films operate.

While these films do not explicitly mention any football association ban, they still reflect its legacy in meaningful ways. *Gregory's Girl* was released six years after the ban was officially lifted in Scotland, yet it reflects the reality that the ban still feels effectively in place as there is no women's team at Dorothy's school. *Gregory's Girl* shows that Dorothy's political awareness enables her to challenge institutional barriers. As a protagonist who is aware of her rights, she insists on being allowed to try out for the football team, arguing that

[17] **1921-1923:** *Meg Foster - Footballer* (1921), *Captain Meg!* (1922), *Football Island* (1922), *Bess of Blacktown* (1922), *Nell O' Newcastle* (1922), *Ray of the Rovers* (1922), and *The Football Factory* (1923). **2019-2022:** *Our Beautiful Game* (2021), *Kicking off: Dick, Kerr Girls* (2020) and *All Together Now: Dick, Kerr Girls* (2022) *Lily and the Rockets* (2019) *Violet's War* (2021) *Vi for Victory* (2021), and *The Match: An Unsuitable Game* (2022).

the coach cannot discriminate against her because of her sex. In this context, football becomes more than just a sport; it is a vehicle that empowers Dorothy and allows her to assert her rights within a setting that reflects modernity and change. While *Bend It Like Beckham* was released thirty-one years after the English FA officially lifted the ban it had on women's football and twenty-one years after the release of *Gregory's Girl*, it reflects a more developed landscape of the game where women's teams are possible to form and exist and athletic scholarships are available. In *Bend It Like Beckham*, Jess and Jules are not portrayed as battling institutional barriers, but rather as confronting cultural and family expectations. Jess's British Indian background adds a further layer of complexity to her struggle, as her pursuit of football is shaped by the unique challenges linked to her ethnicity. All three protagonists hold significant places within the sport. Dorothy and Jules serve as trailblazers, opening doors and creating opportunities, while Jess's represents someone who benefits from that action. Her role should not be underestimated, as visibility and representation are vital in shaping the future of women's football.

Dorothy meets the criteria Mr. Menzies set out ahead of the trial: "A goal-scorer and that requires two basic skills: ball control, shooting accuracy, and the ability to read the game, three things." Even after she has demonstrated her abilities, he still was not sure if he could allow her on the team. He speaks out of a fear of custom claiming, "it is not that simple. It could be out of my hands. We will have to see." Dorothy's reply, "You have got to put me on the team," highlights her refusal to accept not being given the chance to play. Knowing she was the best one in the trials, she follows him and even after he closes the door in her face, she continues to knock on his door: "Mr. Menzies! I want to sign something… Mr Menzies, open the door." Once again, Dorothy is using legal terms to add legitimacy to her participation and make it official.

Dorothy ends up on the team and as viewers we start to see how she is received and the degree of acceptance or tolerance her presence generates at the institutional level, through the authority of the Headteacher (Chic Murray), and among her peers. In a meeting with, Mr. Menzies, the Headteacher addresses the topic of having a female player on the boys' team:

> **Headteacher**: There's a girl in the football team.
> **Mr**. **Menzies**: errr well, yes and no.
> **Headteacher**: Yes, and no?
> **Mr. Menzies**: Yes.
> **Headteacher**: What do you mean?
> **Mr. Menzies**: Well, we could have a girl on the football team if we wanted one.
> **Headteacher**: Do we want one?
> **Mr. Menzies**: Well…

It is noticeable there are no female voices at the decision-making level, an important aspect often raised by sports feminists who advocate for women's participation at all levels of sports. The outcome of the meeting was in fact remarkably straightforward, as the Headteacher states, "I think it is a wonderful idea. Terrific." It highlights the decisions in sport that frequently occur without meaningful female representation, and it also shows that the ban in itself was an arbitrary thing. If it proves to be very easy here for the Headteacher to make a positive decision, it also carries with it a bitter memory of how easily women were banned from playing. Mr. Menzies assures the Headteacher, "she is a great wee player," and adds, "She won't hold the team back one little bit." Ironically, it is Gregory who was underperforming and holding the team back, along with Andy. The implicit assumption is that Mr. Menzies reaction is shaped not by her ability, but by her gender. Had she been male, his response would likely have been different. The Headteacher then moves the practicalities of Dorothy's participation in the school's team. He points out the lack of facilities that could accommodate Dorothy, drawing attention to a potentially controversial issue, the showers: "One possible problem area, the showers. What happens about the showers?" Mr. Menzies' initial reaction highlights a naïve estimation of the situation as he responds, "Oh, she will bring her own soap." His reply reflects that he had not fully considered what accommodating

Dorothy would entail, particularly in terms of the privacy she requires. The Headteacher ensures Mr. Menzies understands that the matter goes beyond simply providing soap, and stresses that everything must be properly managed to avoid problems.

Dorothy's role as a football player is forcing change in the school. However, the school's willingness to welcome Dorothy onto the team is one thing; how her peers receive her is quite another. After securing a spot on the team, and even before receiving any praise, Dorothy is immediately subjected to criticism from a male spectator. This moment reflects the negative public attitudes toward women in football that the film critiques. These attitudes echo the gendered assumptions seen in the 1920s fiction discussed earlier in the dissertation, where the female athlete is placed under constant scrutiny and judgment. This is exemplified by Andy's remarks: "It is not right, it is unnatural. It doesn't even look nice," and "Girls weren't made to play football. It is too tough; it is too physical." Such statements reveal more about persistent gender stereotypes than about the actual sport and are given a comic aspect in that Andy is not especially robust himself, and certainly not when compared to Dorothy. The film deliberately exposes these efforts at male containment as unfounded and increasingly disconnected from a changing social landscape. However, once Dorothy scores, there is a sudden shift in how the spectators perceive her, highlighting the conditional nature of acceptance and the power of performance to challenge deep-rooted biases.

When looking at *Bend It Like Beckham*, Dorothy's legacy shines through Jules. In the beginning of the film, despite the time lag between the lifting of the English FA ban 1971 and the film in 2002, we learn from Jules that there was no girls team for her to play on: "there was nothing here for us girls." Jules acted on this and this was the reason why Hounslow Harriers now has a football team for girls. Her team proves successful, although this success is still measured against the success of the men's game: "now we get as many trophies as the men's side do." Jules's role could be seen as going beyond being the founder of the team; in

many ways, she also takes on the role of a scout, seeking out talent and encouraging girls like Jess to join the team and pursue football more seriously. She is the one who observed Jess playing football at the park and made the move to ask her to trial for the team in order to recruit her. Jess was unaware of the opportunities available for girls, and this, as the film frames it, could be attributed to her ethnicity. After Jess had her successful trial, Joe, the coach told her, "Never seen an Indian girl into football" and her response was, "I did not even know they had a girls' team here." This interaction highlights how a combination of Jess's cultural background and the limited visibility of the sport can affect awareness and access to opportunities for ethnic minority groups. Jules tells Jess her ambition to play football professionally, which surprises Jess, who hadn't realised such opportunities existed. Jules explains that while it may not yet be possible in the UK, there are professional leagues and new stadiums for women's football in America, broadening Jess's perspective on what is possible.

Another aspect *Bend It Like Beckham* brings to light is the problem of racism. Richard Rushton and Gary Bettinson point out the dilemma represented through the two generations of Jess's family: "[...] the film, while celebrating the multicultural melting pot of postcolonialism, also importantly signals the ongoing struggles of colonial mentality beneath the surface of multicultural positivity" (98). Although Jess is presented as more British than she is Indian, despite her attempts to balance the two, in "Teaching Cultural Geography with *Bend It Like Beckham*" Katie Algeo claims that she is never entirely so:

> Jess Bhamra seems irreconcilably caught between the traditional values of her Sikh family and modern British youth culture. She dresses like any British teen, speaks in British slang, and has a burning desire to play the national sport, soccer. Her parents wish her to conform to Sikh norms for young women—to dress modestly, to pursue a university degree and a professional career, and to prepare for marriage by learning to cook Punjabi cuisine (136).

Yet as Caudwell points out in "*Girlfight* and *Bend It Like Beckham*: Screening Women, Sport, and Sexuality", Jess's ethnicity and desire to play football does position her as "other"

(259). On the field, Jess is subjected to racism: an opponent fouls her and then shouts, “Go off, Paki.” Enraged by the remark, Jess pushes the player in response, leading the referee to send her off the pitch with a red card: “Violent conduct towards another player. Go off, Go off.” Despite Jess and her team’s attempts to explain, the referee ignores them, and the opponent is not punished for her racist comment. The scene is significant because it suggests that the women’s game can be just as brutal and intense as the men’s, both physically and psychologically, challenging the assumption that aggression and violence in sport are inherently masculine traits. Its inclusion may serve as a reminder that issues such as racism are not confined to male spaces, but are embedded across the game more broadly, including in women’s football.

Later, in the dressing room, Jess is visibly upset as Joe criticises her behaviour during the match. But Jess stands up for herself, confronting him about the situation. The coach, unaware of the racist remarks directed at Jess, attempts to calm her, saying, “She fouled you. She tugged your shirt. You just overreacted, that’s all.” Jess initially assumes he wouldn’t understand her experience, but to her surprise he says, “Jess, I’m Irish. Of course I’d understand what it feels like.” This moment underscores the presence of racism in the film, but also reveals the impact of colonialism, a shared experience that affects both Jess and her Irish coach. Their shared colonial history deepens their connection in this pivotal exchange. The inclusion of the Irish coach is adroitly placed to draw attention to the possibility of solidarity across marginalised groups. This moment may be guiding the viewer towards a particular reading of contemporary England, one in which racial and ethnic groups experience common forms of racism and exclusion. Rather than presenting these struggles as isolated, the scene gestures towards a broader critique of systemic injustice. It also reinforces football’s role as a site of freedom and aspiration, but also as a medium through which social, racial, gender inequities are realised and made visible. Jess’s experience in the scene

confirms this: she suffers physical injury, followed by racial abuse, and then the failure of the referee to make the right call. All of this reinforces the injustices at hand. Joe's assumption of "what happened," without hearing Jess give the full details, further shows how recognisable such injustices have become. The moment links contemporary discrimination to the historical silencing of women's football, reinforcing the film's suggestion that exclusion and prejudice remain persistent, even as the game evolves. This is also why Jess's father, Mr. Bhamra (Anupam Kher), did not want his daughter to pursue sports, as he did not want her to experience the same racism he had to experience. The father's concerns are informed by his own past experience of marginalisation as an aspiring cricketer, believing that the British will never fully accept Indians as equals (Heinen 75). Mr. Bhamra tries to explain his decision to keep Jess out of sports, specifically football, to Jess's coach, Joe, by sharing his own experience:

> When I was a teenager in Nairobi, I was the best fast bowler in our school. Our team even won the East African Cup. But when I came to this country, nothing. I was not allowed to play in any of the teams, and the bloody goras in their clubhouses made fun of my turban and sent me off packing! None of our boys are in any of the football leagues, do you think they will let our girls? I don't want you to build up Jesminder's hopes. She will only end up disappointed like me.

This adds another dimension to Jess's character that is not an issue for either Dorothy or Jules, showing how ethnicity and cultural identity can present additional challenges in sports. Aarti Ratna's work, as outlined in the methodology, informs the discussion on women's football and race by exposing hard truths that the sport has yet to fully address. Even though *Bend It Like Beckham,* now twenty-four years old, brought issues of race and representation into the spotlight, such challenges continue in women's football today. Racism in women's football in the UK is still prevalent in 2025; players of colour are more likely to get abused on the pitch and off it, whether on social media or elsewhere. The ongoing reality where racism persists, as Ratna suggests, necessitates an 'intersectional' approach, to tackle the root causes of discrimination that may hinder aspiring female players from pursuing football. Ratna

suggests that in spaces such as football, aspects of identity including race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality should not be studied in isolation, but in relation to one another to make inequalities more visible (Ratna, "Intersectional Plays of Identity" 1-2). Ratna's research amplifies the voices of women from marginalised and minority backgrounds whose experiences have historically been excluded or ignored. With the growing academic focus on women in sport, Ratna helps make visible the inequalities rooted in race and ethnicity in women's football especially in the context of the UK.

Both *Gregory's Girl* and *Bend It Like Beckham*, offer an evolving landscape of women's football in Britain. In *Gregory's Girl,* Dorothy boldly pushes against structural barriers, to secure a place for herself in the sport. Jules follows in Dorothy's footsteps, yet her efforts are shaped by a context where women's teams have already gained some traction. *Bend It Like Beckham* presents also a new era: female teams now exist, sporting visible sponsorship like the AXA logo on their shirts, signalling commercial interest in the game and adding a legitimacy to it. While Dorothy's struggle was about bringing her game into existence, Jess and Jules must navigate the established world of women's football, confronting distinct challenges around social respectability, cultural identity, and visibility in sport. Despite the progress being made, both films remind the viewer that the path to true equality in football requires ongoing negotiation, resilience, and a willingness to challenge biases.

7.5 Representations in Question

As covered so far in the chapter, the protagonists are defined by the extent to which they are framed within the male gaze and by their opportunities and access to the sport. Related to this are the romantic storylines that develop, as they further inform the representation of female footballers. Looking back at Chapter Five, fiction from the early twentieth century focuses exclusively on heterosexual romantic relationships. Typically, a 'pretty' female protagonist,

as described in the texts, falls in love with a male character and ends up with a happy ending. In contrast, twenty-first-century fiction (*Our Beautiful Game*, *Kicking Off: Dick, Kerr Girls*, and *All Together Now: Dick, Kerr Girls*) begins to introduce same-sex romantic desire, where protagonists explore the possibility of love with other female characters, reflecting a shift toward more diverse representations of romance. In *Bend It Like Beckham* and *Gregory's Girl*, the films attempt to frame the relations of the protagonists within the realms of heteronormativity and directly avoid representing lesbian characters. Additionally, the subtexts, anxieties, and mockeries that surface in both films reflect a level of cultural discomfort with homosexuality, and specifically with reference to sport. It is important to read the films and the relationship between Jess and Jules in *Bend It Like Beckham* in the moment it emerged and not view the film from a 2025 standpoint where the extent of tolerance and acceptance is different than it was nearly 23 years ago.

This theoretical foundation is particularly useful in considering female sports films such as *Bend It Like Beckham*. A queer reading of the relationship between Jess and Jules emerges through what Katharina Lindner describes in "Gender Trouble in Female Sports Films": "the protagonists' relationship develops primarily within the sports context and it is the development of a (physically) close bond between the female characters that arguably opens the film up for a 'lesbian' reading" (491). Caudwell extends this interpretation by examining how the film negotiates sexuality through football. While football is presented as a space in which non-heterosexual relations might evolve, the narrative ultimately seeks "to establish heterosexuality as 'natural'" (Caudwell, "*Girlfight* and *Bend It Like Beckham"* 257). The intentional exclusion of lesbianism, Caudwell argues, is "fundamental to the privileging of heterosexuality" (265). Caudwell's analysis draws on queer theory as a critical lens that "seeks to expose the practices that configure sexuality and, importantly, question the 'naturalness' of sexuality" (258). This perspective goes beyond simply reading for lesbian

subtext and instead "involves consideration of counter-hegemonic sexuality" (263). Caudwell further explains why the lesbian character is avoided: "[the] signs of lesbianism are recuperated to expose heterosexuality as the more visible and viable version of the sporting heroine" (260). Together, these insights demonstrate how *Bend It Like Beckham* can be productively read through queer theory, revealing both the possibilities it opens for counter-hegemonic readings and the ways it reasserts heterosexuality as the norm.

Caudwell also draws attention to how films like *Bend It Like Beckham* contribute to what she describes as "the erasure of the lesbian sport star" (260) as she examines "how sexuality appears in mediated visual and narrative spaces of film" (256). This encapsulates the broader pattern within sports films where female athleticism is depicted, yet the presence of the lesbian athlete is ignored. Caudwell further emphasises this point by stating, "there are very few films that feature a female athlete and the representation of a 'lesbian one' is quite non-existent" (260). This insight exposes the limitations in cinematic representations of female athletes, bringing to light the continual invisibility of lesbian identities in sports narratives and pointing to a critical gap in media portrayals, though, as mentioned earlier, the reality of the sport itself encourages such representation to be present on page and on screen. But it is important to acknowledge here that the film is a product of its time concerning how it tolerates or pushes back on lesbian portrayals in sports.

In *Bend It Like Beckham*, despite this "erasure" of the lesbian female athlete, the film invites a 'lesbian reading' of the two main characters, Jess and Jules. A good part of the film's narrative revolves around Jules's mother, Mrs. Paxton, who is persistently fearful that her daughter might be lesbian, and in many ways attempts to keep check on her daughter's sexuality. As Caudwell notes, "In *Bend It Like Beckham*, it is sexuality that is being surveyed and regulated by the figure of the mother" (262). Jules's mother could be understood as "the most homophobic character" in the film (Abdel-Shehid and Kalman-Lamb 147). According

to Pat Griffin (1998:57-9), as quoted in *Heroines of Sport* , "much of the prejudice and discrimination against lesbians in sport arises from the fear that they are predators who will seduce and corrupt girls and young women which, she suggests, taps into 'the deepest fears of parents and heterosexual athletes and coaches'"(Hargreaves, *Heroines of Sport* 138–39). Therefore, homophobia is manifested in the film through Mrs. Paxton's repeated expressions of anxiety about her daughter's sexuality and the series of misjudgements that "precipitates the comedy of errors" in the film (Ghosh 92). Although Mrs. Paxton's homophobia is mixed with humour, it does not make it less harmful. Rather, it reflects deep-rooted fear, reinforcing an underlying stereotype that female footballers have a tendency towards lesbianism "[T]he basis of homophobia[18] is the assumption that to be heterosexual is 'normal' and to be a lesbian 'deviant' – an attitude which becomes consolidated and reproduced every day in sports" (Hargreaves, *Sporting Females* 305). For example, she refers to the women footballers in the posters in her daughter's room as 'butch'. In addition, Paula tries to control what her daughter wears, as an attempt to "feminize" her because she does not want to her to be a 'butch lesbian,' but the more she is drawing on the opposite image, the more the film is reinforcing a stereotypical image of the lesbian character in sport. Caudwell argues that "the film relies on discourses of femininity, such as those surrounding fashion, shopping, marriage, family, and ethnicity to produce heterosexuality" (Caudwell, "*Girlfight* and *Bend It Like Beckham"* 262). Therefore, the continuous attempts from the mothers, as mentioned earlier, to "feminize" their daughters could come out of a fear of homosexuality.

Arguably, the breakdown of the mother at the wedding of Jess's sister was her most significant indication of her fears around her daughter's homosexuality. She could not control herself and started to accuse the two, Jess and Jules, of being in a relationship. On the other

[18] "A fear, intolerance and hatred of gay men and lesbians" (Hargreaves, *Sporting Females: Critical Issues in the History and Sociology of Women's Sports* 305)

hand, Jess's family do not voice the same fears as Paula, or at least they seem to be unaware of this possible concern. Jess's mother's main fear is that playing football will prevent Jess from marrying and fulfilling traditional expectations. When Jess's family mistake Jules for a boy that was the real concern, and they let go when they realised it was a girl. According to Caudwell, "in this scene, lesbianism is ignored" (260) and once again, this moment shows how the film uses humour to hide deeper fears about same-sex relationships, and in doing so, it ends up supporting traditional views on sexuality rather than questioning them.

The film, however, does not eliminate gay characters from its cast. Tony, Jess's friend who is also Indian-British, comes out as gay. However, he understands that his family would not tolerate his 'difference' which is also a source of anxiety for him: "Tony's anxiety to keep his homosexuality a secret and Jules's mother's paranoia, stemming from her suspicion that Jess and Jules share a homosexual relationship, reveal the discomfiture aroused by same-sex sexual practices and identities in the majority as well as minority cultures"(Chacko 84). In the film, Tony comes out only to Jess, and her parents seem to believe that she and Tony are a couple. This misunderstanding explains why the kiss between Jess and Joe is not seen by her parents and why Tony is present at her send-off at the airport. Portraying Jess, a British-Indian from a conservative Sikh background, as a lesbian might well be too disruptive of a topic for her family to handle. Arguably, the comic structure of the film could not support such a derangement. The film already shows her falling for a white boy as being difficult for the family to accept, and the presence of Tony raises questions about whether her family is aware of her romantic involvement with Joe, the Irish coach. Although Joe is apparently accepted by the family in the final scene of the film, at the airport Jess seems to give her parents the impression that she is with Tony. Joe's status is left unclear. Ultimately, these complexities reveal how the film navigates cultural and sexual identities within the constraints of family expectations and social norms.

The broad appeal and humour of *Bend It Like Beckham* helped to make it a huge box office success: "[*Bend It Like*] *Beckham* has enjoyed a smooth sailing since its release: it has not been surrounded by any controversy, nor has it generated any sharp divide in opinion" (Radner and Stringer 165). Yet some scholars have questioned the authenticity of its cultural representations. Sandra Heinen argues that the depiction of South Asians in *Bend It Like Beckham* is deliberately not a realistic one so that it can reach a wider audience (76). Another part of Chadha's success with the film lies in her ability to make Indian culture appealing and comprehensible within Western film genres, and as such she reinforces certain stereotypes (75–76). For example, "Jules's mother automatically assumes that Jess's parents will arrange a marriage for her and that Jess can teach Jules devotion and feminine behaviour" (75). The film repeatedly presents Jules's passion for football as a barrier to her chances of finding a male partner. When Paula first meets Jess, she immediately assumes that as a young girl from an Indian background, her parents will already be on the hunt for a husband fit for their daughter: "I expect your parents are fixing you up with a handsome young doctor" (Chacko 84). While the film is celebrated for its positive portrayal of cultural diversity, some critics argue it oversimplifies complex social issues and fails to reflect the real challenges of diversity (Heinen 76). These examples highlight that while *Bend It Like Beckham* promotes cultural inclusivity, its reliance on familiar stereotypes reveals the limitations of its representation.

In *Gregory's Girl* the dual focus is on Gregory's pursuit of love and Dorothy's pursuit of football. The film prominently features heteronormative relationships, with male characters being overtly expressive of their sexual desires. The film emphasises heterosexual dynamics while subtly acknowledging the taboo surrounding same-sex relationships, particularly within the domain of men's football, a sport often associated with traditional masculinity. This is most evident in the film in an interaction between Gregory and Steve

(Billy Greenlees), another male character in the film, about falling in love with someone on the football team. Gregory is attempting to talk about his feelings for Dorothy, but Steve assumes that it is with a male teammate and dismisses it as a possible phase:

> **Steve**: "Really. Have you told anyone else about this? Probably it is just a phase. Who is it? Is it Andy?"
> **Gregory**: "No, it is a girl."

This reaction in a way emphasises the stigma associated with non-heteronormative desires and highlights how men's football, particularly, reinforces the notion that homosexuality is incompatible with the sport's masculine image. However, the tone of this dialogue also suggests that Steve would not be surprised that Gregory was gay and would be okay with it. It also implies that Steve might find Andy attractive. If football is heteronormative, Steve doesn't seem to agree. The ambiguity in his response is highlighted by the fact that Scotland had decriminalised homosexuality in 1980 (Coleshill and Ozell 95), a year before the film was released (1980).

Furthermore, Dorothy's romantic disinterestedness in Gregory might be regarded as her most singular thing and might offer a queer reading. Dorothy might be showing a general lack of interest in dating, or more precisely in dating a male character, and performing within the confines of heteronormativity. Her role is centred more on football, positioning her as someone whose primary involvement in the narrative is connected to the sport rather than to forming romantic relationships. As such, she presents yet another possible image of the woman footballer, as asexual, or rather as someone so entirely devoted to football that they are not interested in everything else. But Dorothy also made sure that Gregory's romantic life is sorted out, and the dating subplot further shows Dorothy's agency and the control she takes over this type of relationship. Gregory idealises Dorothy, failing to see her as a real person, he is more in love with the idea of having a girlfriend than Dorothy herself. His feelings are

easily transferred to three other female characters, replacing Dorothy on what was supposed to be their first date. This reinforces the notion that his interest in her was more about the fantasy she represented than her authentic self.

Although both films are representations of female footballers, the films leave out, deliberately or not, the lesbian figure, and focus on heteronormative relationships, though the reality of women's football allows such depiction. But what *Gregory's Girl* excels in is Dorothy's queering of heteronormativity. Because she is playing football, she is seen to be "like a boy". This is ironic, as Gregory and others also sing the praises of her beauty. Yet still this is not enough, and as she plays football there must be something wrong. Dorothy remains a problem that the boys cannot solve. This is evident in a conversation between Gregory and Eric (Allan Love), his photographer friend:

> **Eric**: She is a beauty. She is a dream to photograph. Some of the guys reckon that she is too much like a boy.
> **Gregory**: Her like a boy… nah. No, she is just modern.
> **Eric**: You're right. It's modern. It's the future. In another million years there'll be no men, no women, they'll just be people. It's logical evolution. Evolution is a thing.
> **Gregory**: No more men and women? Just a whole world full of wankers.
> **Eric**: This modern girl, made to be photographed.

Gregory and Eric discuss Dorothy as modern, or even as a prototype of a new form of epicene being. In terms of the discussion of the male gaze that the film performs, this represents another stage of fantasy that projects beyond a conventional sexual economy. In the context of the film, it means that Dorothy could be a beauty and still play football. Doing so within a male-dominant team does not necessarily make her like a boy. In resolving these apparent contradictions, Dorothy is modern, almost superhuman. This takes us back to the same view found in some of the early fiction covered in Chapter Five, where a 'new' notion of femininity is introduced and playing football, a masculine sport, does not conflict with beauty. Eric links the "modern" to evolution, but as a progressive and future-focused idea.

This contrasts with Andy's use of evolution as a form of naively reactionary defence earlier in the film: "If women were supposed to play football, they'd have their tits somewhere else. They were not designed for football."

In both films, the dominant form of representation of female protagonists tends to place them within the realms of heteronormativity, but this then allows for play, challenging and queering their gender expression and roles. Dorothy realises that Gregory desires her early on and works on shifting Gregory's attention to Susan, who at an earlier point in the film had expressed her interest when she asked Dorothy about him. In *Bend It Like Beckham*, the love plot develops when both Jess and Jules fall for their football coach Joe. Both films frame their main female characters within heterosexual interest, but they also allow for lines of flight out of the love plot.

7.6 Conclusion

Both of these films represent the era after the lifting of the ban and step away from the historical setting of WWI Britain dominant in the other fictions that have been analysed. They offer a sense of the potential of football as a social force, as well as a zone of progressive imagination, and see it as enlivening their particular social and cultural settings. Football can be liberative, whether it is in a Scottish new town or in suburban London. The chapter argued that *Bend It Like Beckham* largely avoids framing the female protagonists within the male gaze but has an aptly complicated sense of the pervasiveness of the male gaze through its impact upon the mother figures in the film. On the other hand, Dorothy in *Gregory's Girl* queers the male gaze by constantly finding ways to escape it, mainly through her rejection of Gregory's romantic interest.

All in all, the two films shed light on the female footballer experience that is unique to the time period that each one of them represents and the opportunities available to them. Dorothy and Jules establish themselves in the films as trailblazers opening doors for young

girls and represent how to create the opportunity to play and to force change to happen. Jess's experience is different from Jules and Dorothy's experiences as her ethnic background adds a layer of complication to her footballing experience, but most importantly her presence reflects a more inclusive representation in fiction that is significant in the context of sports.

Finally, as I was writing this chapter, England won the 2025 Women's Euro in Switzerland. With their success growing and history constantly being made, it was the perfect opportunity for Gurinder Chadha to announce a "follow up" to the 2002 hit *Bend It Like Beckham* (Wrack, "Bend It Like Beckham Follow-up in Pipeline More than 20 Years after Original Film Was Released"). Although no details were announced about what the film will present, it could be seen as a piece of perfect timing to capitalise on the English teams' continued success. Additionally, it could be the turning point in cinematic representation where the lesbian character is finally represented in her own right. The announcement of this sequel provides proof that when women's football is making waves on the field, it is reflected on the cultural and literary scene.

Chapter Eight: The Conclusion

Both fiction and film continue to offer a small number of works featuring a female football protagonist. The research on these protagonists remains similarly limited and under-researched. Therefore, this dissertation offers an original contribution to addressing the identified gap by examining the representation of the female football protagonist in prose fiction and film at different points in history through an interdisciplinary approach. Literary studies, history, sports feminism (sociology), queer studies, and film studies were all used to inform the analysis and close reading of the texts and films. The thesis reflects the historical struggle of women footballers in fiction through each protagonist's individual football journey and how it contributes to a collective process of becoming resolute. In part, they are struggling even to have a history. What remains constant in these fictions is that the female footballer is represented as resilient, powerful, and strong.

The first chapter introduced the research questions, significance, and limitations of the study. It introduced the primary sources of the thesis from 1921-1923 and 2019-2022, along with the two films from 1881 and 2002. The chapter illustrated the timeline of the selected fiction and films, considering the 1921 English Football Association ban as the starting point, which is also the year of the first publication analysed in the dissertation. Additionally, the chapter described the use of key terms like 'gender', 'sex', and 'sexuality' in the context of the thesis. The chapter identified the assumed readership of each fiction and provided a brief summary of each chapter. It ended by contextualising the thesis within contemporary changes. The second chapter introduced the dissertation's methodological approaches: archival research, contextualisation, and close reading and textual analysis. The interdisciplinary approach draws from literary studies, history, sports feminism, queer studies, and film studies to inform the analysis and close reading of the texts. The analysis adopted theoretical approaches from Jennifer Hargreaves, Heide Eng, Heather Sykes, and

Aarti Ratna. Jayne Caudwell's research on women's football in the UK was also consulted, and Michel Foucault's analytical framework was used to identify power dynamics in the selected fiction. Lastly, Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze and John Berger's work were applied to analyse the films.

Chapter Three provided the necessary historical context for women's football in Britain. The selected fiction from both the early 1920s and from the period 2019-2022 should be read within this context. Throughout the dissertation, the analysis has shown that three factors in particular, the English Football Association 1921 ban, the first wave of feminism, and the impact of World War One exerted a direct influence on the women's game and shaped the plot and character development of all of the protagonists in the texts examined. In addition, the chapter examined the 1970s as a key moment in women's sport, when it emerged as a serious subject of the broader efforts of the feminist movement aimed to expand on women's freedoms, expose inequalities, and demand change. Tracing the historical progression of the feminist movement and situating developments in women's football in its different waves provided essential context for the study. This was particularly important given that sports feminism, used here as a theoretical framework, calls for equal opportunities for women, women's participation in decision making, increased funding, and greater visibility. The chapter concluded by addressing the current issues faced by female athletes, demonstrating that an understanding of the contemporary state of women in sports, viewed in light of its history, is crucial to interpreting how fiction engages with present realities and, in particular, how twenty-first-century fiction reflects experiences of female players.

After establishing the necessary context, Chapter Four introduced football as a literary category. The chapter traced the emergence of football fiction within the broader genre of sports fiction and mapped the sub-genres of football fiction, aimed both at male and female readership. Lee McGowan's mapping revealed a clear discrepancy, privileging the

male readership over the female. The chapter argued that the instability of women's football fiction, its recurring appearance and disappearance, largely reflects the marginalisation of the female footballer, particularly as a consequence of the English FA ban, though other factors, such as a shift in the public and/or editorial interest may also have contributed. In addition, the chapter identified a new trend in publications from 2019 to 2022, which expands on McGowan's framework to include historical adult women's football fiction and historical young adult women's football fiction. It also considered the readership of young adult historical fiction, where the forgotten history of the women's game is being introduced to younger readers. The chapter concluded by questioning whether historical inaccuracies matter, suggesting that absolute historical accuracy is not essential to producing compelling and authentic representations of the female footballer.

Furthering the exploration of the female footballer as a figure of historical significance, Chapter Five offered an in-depth analysis of prose fiction from the early 1920s. The texts examined included *Nell O' Newcastle* (1922) by Steve Nelson, Don Gray's *Bess of Blacktown* (1922), the trilogy *Meg Foster—Footballer* (1921), *Captain Meg!* (1922), and *Football Island* (1922), *Ray of the Rovers* (1922) by C. Malcolm Hincks, and *The Football Factory* (1923) by Don Gray. This chapter argued that the protagonists Nell Harmer, Bessie Booth, Meg Foster, Ray Lester, and Rose Mallory are all represented as empowering and politically-aware figures. While their reliance on male figures varies, their radical actions collectively set an empowering example of female football players challenging patriarchal and institutional barriers to secure their place on the field. The characters serve as literary representations of women's broader struggle for greater agency, physical autonomy, and the right to participate in sports without restrictions based on gender or the type of activity. The chapter demonstrated how a Foucauldian approach can reveal underlying power structures

within the texts. It also applied Jennifer Hargreaves early work in sports feminism to show how gender can disadvantage the protagonists.

Chapter Six explored the contemporary novels: *Lily and the Rockets* (2019) by Rebecca Stevens, *Our Beautiful Game* (2021) by Lou Kuenzler, *Kicking Off: Dick, Kerr Girls* (2020) and *All Together Now: Dick, Kerr Girls* (2022) by Eve Ainsworth, *Violet's War* (2021) and *Vi for Victory* (2021) by Rosemary J. Kind, followed by *The Match: An Unsuitable Game* (2022) by Diana Townsend. Each protagonist, Lily Dodd, Polly Nabb, Martha, Hettie, Violet Dobson, Florrie Walsh, and Alice is depicted as a munitionettes, situating their footballing identities as a direct consequence of the First World War and its impact on women's labour. Whereas the 1920s texts examined in Chapter Five, foregrounded women's struggles against institutional and patriarchal barriers, these more recent works engage with the same period through a different lens. In *Violet's War, Vi for Victory*, and *The Match: An Unsuitable Game* football is framed as part of the war effort, with women raising funds to support medical services, while at the same time critiquing governmental failures in planning and wartime management.

In *Lily and the Rockets* and *Our Beautiful Game,* the female protagonists, Lily Dodd and Polly Nabb, stand out as examples of tomboys, which reflects an expansion of the literary image of the female footballer beyond more conventional representations of the femininity characteristic of 1920s fiction. This chapter argued that these texts reinforce the idea of football as a masculine game traditionally associated with boys. However, In *Our Beautiful Game*, *Kicking Off: Dick, Kerr Girls* and *All Together Now: Dick, Kerr Girls,* the main female characters, Polly, Martha, and Hettie, mark a departure from earlier fictions that strictly favoured heterosexual relationships by introducing representations of homosexuality. This development reflects necessary and natural evolution of the fiction, making it more relevant to the realities of the women's game in twenty-first-century Britain and enabling it to

resonate more closely with contemporary football culture. All in all, the chapter showcased that the representation of female protagonists remains embedded in the struggle to play football and shoulder the burdens of national service and personal sacrifice, while also dealing with internal conflicts related to sexuality and body image. This marks a significant shift from the female football protagonist of the 1920s, whose struggles were framed more narrowly around institutional exclusion and conventional ideas of femininity. In addition to Jennifer Hargreaves' earlier work in sports feminism, this chapter's analysis was informed by Heidi Eng's research on queer theory and sport. This framework helped to explain shifts in representation of female football protagonists, highlighting the changes in representation and the development of the field of sports feminism, as theoretical approaches have evolved to address the diverse and emerging identities of women in sport.

Following the analysis of contemporary prose fiction in Chapter Six, Chapter Seven shifted focus from literature to film, examining cinematic representations of female protagonists in the post-ban era in *Gregory's Girl* (1981) and *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002). The chapter's analysis centred on three aspects: the role of the male gaze, the extent of the protagonists' access to football and the opportunities available to them, and the possibilities for alternative readings of the romantic relationships depicted in each work. In *Gregory's Girl*, Dorothy is situated within the male gaze, but repeatedly resists it, never fully surrendering to its control. In *Bend It Like Beckham*, although the film makes a conscious effort to de-centre the male gaze, the protagonists' mothers Mrs. Bhamra and Mrs. Paxton, continually reinscribe their daughters within it. The analysis of this part of the chapter drew on Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze and John Berger's work.

The film also voiced fears or cultural anxieties around homosexuality, linking female interest in football to the possibility of being lesbian or to a perceived risk of diminished femininity. The chapter also argued that the films allow for potential 'queer' readings. This

part of the chapter used Jayne Caudwell's research to analyse the possible queer readings in *Bend It Like Beckham.* The introduction of the football coach, Joe, serves to ensure that Jess and Jules are not framed romantically in *Bend It Like Beckham*, and yet the possibility of such a relationship remains in play, however, subtle. Heterosexuality remains the dominant form of relational framing in *Gregory's Girl*; however, Dorothy's refusal to display romantic interest or respond to Gregory's romantic advances can arguably be read as displacing her sexuality from the dominant cycle of heteronormativity in which everyone else spins.

Both films provided insight into the state of the women's game in the post-ban era, where the protagonists navigated different challenges and entertained different powers to keep the game going and growing. Despite advancements, the films revealed that equality in football remains conditional, subject to persistent negotiation, resilience, and a willingness to question and confront systemic disadvantage. Aarti Ratna's research, which moves beyond the focus on white able-bodied women in sport, was consulted in this chapter. Her research shows how inequality in sports extends beyond gender and sexuality to include race. Jules, the only protagonist of colour, was used to highlight wider marginalisation and limited representation in football. Ratna's work signals the shift in the sociology of sports and sports feminism to become more inclusive.

In conclusion, while the analysis of both prose fictions and films has demonstrated how representations of female footballers continue to be shaped by questions of gender, sexuality, and access, it also highlights the limits of what is currently known about the literary history of the women's game. This research does not claim definitively that no fiction featuring a female football protagonist existed before 1921, rather it builds on the work of Alethea Melling, who first explored this body of prose fiction (1921-1923). Further archival investigation is necessary to uncover additional texts that might broaden the genre of women's football fiction. Attention should also be given to making the 1920s fiction more

accessible, and not exclusive to the archives of the British Library as wider availability would not only render these works more reachable but also encourage greater scholarly engagement with this field.

Locating the fiction is one task; analysing the texts and their cultural representations is another. This dissertation has suggested one possible way of reading the selected fiction and films through theoretical approaches borrowed mainly from sports sociology. While this approach was exploratory, the need for further research remains necessary to develop a dedicated literary framework for analysing sports texts featuring female athletes. Moreover, having examined the history of the women's game in Britain and the fiction from the 1920s, future research should also consider the value of early women's football fiction as a source of historical evidence. Building on archival recovery and the development of new theoretical frameworks for understanding the early representations of the female footballer, it is equally important to consider how the fiction continues to evolve in the present. With women's football in the UK gaining increasing popularity, the literary and cultural space is likewise expanding to reflect and capitalise on this growth. Future fiction is likely to engage more explicitly with LGBTQ+ themes and characters consolidating the game's identity as a 'queer-friendly' space. Narratives may also address the challenges faced by twenty-first-century players, the rapid transformations within the sport, and the recent triumphs of England's women's football team.

An additional area for future research could explore how female football protagonist's narratives are constructed in real time in the contemporary sports landscape, and the digital age we live in. Female footballers no longer depend on traditional institutions or media outlets to amplify their professional journeys. The emergence of social media has provided them with a powerful platform to construct and reconstruct their public image. Consequently, the modern female footballer can be an athlete and influencer who engages vast online

audiences, as exemplified by Swiss forward Alisha Lehmann. Although social media can be a powerful tool for women footballers concerning the management of their own image, whether or not social media is ultimately empowering or restrictive for women footballers is debatable. As Mary McGill observes, "…social media as it exists today is not built for kindness or productive discussions. It is built for judgement, for surveillance, for conflict, for emotional and behavioural manipulation" (209). Players have evolved into marketable brands, and their income increasingly derives not solely from athletic performance but from the commercial value of their personal image and digital presence. Their online stories have become sites of contest wherein they might exert some control but are also highly vulnerable to both online abuse and the demands of conformity that are both implicit and explicit in digital media, which creates its own kinds of fiction about what the footballing woman might be.

In its various forms, fiction bridges past and present, offering both a historical reading and record of the women's game, and presents a cultural site for challenging stereotypes and reshaping attitudes. Yet its impact will remain limited without improved media coverage and stronger institutional support through reforms in policy and governance. Crucially, lasting change in how women's football is perceived, valued, and supported must come not only from literature and cultural representation but from top-down institutional commitment and wider societal recognition. It takes courage and imagination to play a game. What the fiction provides goes beyond the 90 or 120 minutes of any given game. The fiction creates an imaginative space that allows us to see and experience the historical, social, and political side of the game. In this dissertation, football in fiction reveals itself as a cause, a game, a tale. The future holds endless possibilities and stories yet to be written.

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