

Feminising Football and Its Fandom: The Ideological Construction of Women's Super League

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Abstract : This paper explores the structure and culture of the English Football Association (FA) the governing body of soccer in England, in relation to the development of the FA Women's Super League (WSL). In doing so, it examines the organisation's journey from banning the sport in 1921 to establishing the country's first semi professional female soccer league in 2011. As the FA has a virtual monopoly on defining the structures of the elite game, we attempted to understand its behaviour in the context of broader issues of power, control and resistance by giving voice to the experiences of those affected by its decisions. Observations were carried out at 39 matches over three years. Semi structured interviews with 17 people involved in the women's game, identified via snowball sampling, were also carried out. Transcripts accompanied detailed field notes and were inductively coded to identify themes. What emerged was the governing body's desire to create a new product, jettisoning the long history of the women's game in order to shape and control the sport in a way it is no longer able to, with the elite male club game. The League created was also shaped by traditional conceptualisations of gender, in terms of the portrayal of its style of play and target audience, setting increased participation and spectatorship targets as measures of 'success'. The national governing body has demonstrated pseudo inclusion and a lack of enthusiasm for the implementation of equity reforms, driven by a belief that the organisation is already representative, fair and accessible. Despite a consistent external pressure, the Football Association is still dominated at its most senior levels by males. Via claiming to hold a monopoly on expertise around the sport, maintaining complex committee structures and procedures, and with membership rules rooted in the amateur game, it remains a deeply gendered organisation, resistant to structural and cultural change. In WSL, the FA's structure and culture have created a franchise over which it retains almost complete control, dictating the terms of conditions of entry and marginalising alternative voices. The organisation presents a feminised version of both play and spectatorship, portraying the sport as a distinct, and lesser, version of soccer.

Keywords : football association, organisational culture, soccer, women's super league

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