



DEVON COUNTY FA INSPIRING STORIES



**ENGLAND
FOOTBALL**

ENHANCING LIVES THROUGH FOOTBALL IN DEVON





MEET THE GIRLS WHO ARE INSPIRING OTHERS

Three of Devon's most promising young footballers are sharing their inspiring stories to encourage more young girls in the county to get involved in the game.

Issi Hebard, Freya Weeks and Kiesha Walker currently play in the Devon FA Girls' Under-16 team and their involvement with Devon has led to them being selected for the England talent pathway.

Their message to other young girls in Devon with dreams of playing football is: "This could be you, too."

Here are their stories ...

ISSI HEBARD



Age: 15

Position: Right wing / Central midfield

From: Braunton, North Devon

School: Braunton Academy

Current teams:

Chivenor Soccer School

Devon FA Under-16

England Under-16



ISSI HEBARD



I started playing football when I was four-years-old, when we moved to Branton, a village in North Devon. Branton have a grassroots team, so I joined that. It was a boys' team, but we knew the coach and he let me in. I was with them right up until 2023 and I still join them occasionally now for training sessions on a Saturday morning when I'm not playing in the JPL for Chivenor Soccer School. I think for girls, it's important to play boys' football for the challenge, especially when you're younger as there's not always access to a girls' team. I don't think I would be where I am now if it wasn't for the boys' teams. I'd say that Branton grassroots was my first inspiration and made me love the game, really.

My brother was important in me getting started in football. He used to play football and a bit of rugby, and he now plays volleyball for England. He's a couple of years older than me and has always been very supportive. My mum and dad have always encouraged me, too. At the start, it was just about having a bit of fun and playing with my mates. Then I started to really love it. I've always been competitive, and that competitiveness was the other big spark that brought it alright for me. It made me want to carry on and make progress.

As well as playing for Branton FC boys' team, I also trained with Chivenor Soccer School from the age of seven. It used to be linked to Southampton FC and is now linked to Plymouth Argyle FC, so it's quite a high-level boys' team. This season, I have just started playing with the U16 boys in the JPL with Chivenor Soccer School. Again, this club did not have any girls and was very much linked to the boys' development when I started with them, but they allowed me to join and play with them. They now actually have a thriving girls' section as well, which is great. But I have always stayed with the boys. Playing with boys of my age, you have to be quite strong mentally and physically. And my team-mates have been 100% supportive – I don't think I could ever have a group of boys that respect me as much. Things do change as you get older. When you're younger, you don't think of yourself as being any different to the boys, you're like one of the lads playing. But more recently, I've realised I have to be a little bit more careful – my mum always panics when I go into tackles!

ISSI HEBARD

Being with Devon FA has been huge for me, it's completely changed my career. I first got involved with the Devon FA Advanced Coaching Centre (now Emerging Talent Centre) when I was about 11. My coach mentioned the Devon trials to me, so I went along to a trial, and I got in. I started in the Under-12s, moved through to the Under-14s and now I'm in the Under-16s. Joining the Devon FA Girls' pathway was my first experience of playing in a girls' team, rather than a boys' or mixed team. It was different, I was adapting to the way girls play. It's a different environment, too, so it was a completely new thing for me.

If I wasn't at Devon FA, I wouldn't be anywhere on the girls' pathway, and the pathway is what's got me to England. It's where people started to watch me and it's where I met Sarah Lawler-Edwards, the South West lead for identifying talent for England. Sarah came to a few games, which was quite scary at the time. Then, about a year ago, I was invited to some England regional events, where you get watched. From there, I was selected to go to two National Talent Camps. It's basically an England camp, but for players who are a year below, so it's like a trial to get into England. That was exciting – but nerve-wracking as well!





"Getting my England shirt is something I'll remember forever".

ISSI HEBARD

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My best experience in football so far was going to Sweden with the England Under-16s, which was the age group above me. Getting that message to say I was going was unreal, it was a dream, to be honest. The whole trip was amazing. I managed to score two goals – one in the first game I played, against the Faroe Islands, and the other one was against Sweden in the semi-final. Getting my England shirt is something I'll remember forever. At a recent England match against the Republic of Ireland at St George's Park, I was captain, this was scary, but it was also an amazing feeling and I felt really proud of this moment.

My latest call-up was for the trip to Turkey at the end of February 2024, when I started all three fixtures against Ecuador, Norway, and Denmark. I scored, got an assist, and was named player of the match against Norway. I was also captain for the first game against Ecuador.

Another great experience was with my grassroots team at Braunton. We used to play in the R&T tournaments every year. You go there and you get mud all over you and it's just fun. I loved that and it really motivated me. I got Player of the Tournament twice in a row when I was eight and nine, which was amazing because there are about 30 teams in it. Grassroots is key for me. That's where all my mates are and they're my mates for life. And then there were my first few games for the Devon FA girls' team. These are the main memories I know I'll never forget.

My dream is to play for the senior Lionesses and play in the WSL. Having a team that can achieve things, like winning the FA Cup or the Champions League, would be amazing. Going home on the coach and singing, that's what I've dreamed of since I was four-years-old. And having that team environment is huge – you can support others and they can support you. That's the main thing for me, I wouldn't be playing football without it.

Living in a remote area has been difficult at times. As I got older and we realised I could get somewhere with football, we had to look at where I could go to start being watched. That's when we realised that travelling was going to have quite a big impact. It takes almost two hours to get to training with Devon FA at Ivybridge. Switching from boys to girls is also tricky, and managing what age group to be at with the boys is hard. I'm 15 and playing with Chivenor Under-16 Boys is physical. You've got to balance that, with the risk of injuries and boys slide-tackling you – some of the centre-backs are 6ft and have got beards!



"I hope that I can inspire other girls".

ISSI HEBARD

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My message to other young girls in Devon who want to play football is to just get started and join your local grassroots team.

Enjoy the game and worry about the serious, competitive stuff when you get a bit older. From joining a team, see where it goes, it just happens.



ISSI HEBARD



It won't always be easy. You'll be facing a lot of challenges and it's about working through them, that's normal. For example, when I went on my first National Talent Camp with England, I felt really homesick. I'd turn up in my Devon or Chivenor kit and all the girls were there with their Arsenal or Man United shirts on, because all the girls at my first camp were from academies at WSL clubs. You look at them all, and because of the badge they've got on their chest, it's scary. But after a few days at camp, you forget it because you all know each other, and the environment is so close. By the end of the week, you're great mates and you don't want to leave. Now, I know the girls so well and to me, we're not different. I don't think of them as Man United players or Arsenal players, I just think of us as England. So, it's just getting through that initial scary feeling. Also, I like that I come from and play for Devon, because it makes me feel different and I like that.

I hope that I can inspire other girls. Quite a few of the players at Chivenor are younger than me and have got potential, and I'm looking at them, thinking they could go on to have the same experiences as me. And there are girls in my school now who are on the pathway with the Under-12s. I always have chats with them. I like to help the team when I can, not only when I've got the ball, but also at other times by acting as a leader on the pitch, by being positive with the players, because I know what they're facing and how hard it is sometimes. There are times when you feel like, 'is this for me?' But everyone dreams of playing for Arsenal or playing for England and that's the motivation that I look to if I'm struggling sometimes. Just stay positive and remember the outcome that you want.





INSPIRING STORIES

ENHANCING LIVES THROUGH FOOTBALL IN DEVON



FREYA WEEKS



Age: 15

Position: Goalkeeper

From: Kingsbridge, South Devon

School: Ivybridge Community College

Current teams:

Plymouth Argyle

Bristol City

England U15's

Devon FA Under 16's



FREYA WEEKS



When I was about seven or eight-years-old, I was always going to watch my brothers playing football. At that time, I was more of a gymnastics girl than a football girl. But as I got older, all the girls that were at my brothers' football were playing football as well. So, I went along to their football once, really enjoyed it, and it all started from there.

I didn't play in goal at first, I played in midfield. A bit later, I started playing in goal as well because two of my three brothers are goalkeepers. They've always been a massive inspiration. They're doing well, playing at a good level, and I wanted to be like them. In the garden, they'd push me to play in goal and I realised I was good at it. I think doing gymnastics helped. When it reached a point where I had to focus on one position to play in, I chose being in goal.

As soon as I started, I went into boys' football at Ivybridge. There was a lot of pressure in the boys' team, and I enjoyed it. Then I went to the girls' team, but I didn't enjoy it as much, so I went back to the boys' team. Playing against boys and realising how many girls were in the boys' teams – it was mixed really – it was so much better for me. Then, I started at Plymouth Argyle for the Under-10s, which eventually led me to joining Devon FA.

I also played at Marine Academy Plymouth for a while. We won quite a lot and then a new team was made, called Ocean City, and myself and my team-mates all went there. We won the Devon Cup and the League in one season. That boosted my confidence a lot because I feel that when you're with a good group of girls, and a good friendship group, when you play together, the chemistry in that team shows so much. Almost all of us from that team are still playing together now, or we still speak to each other.



"I did the Devon trial with a broken toe - but I got in!".

FREYA WEEKS

FREYA WEEKS

Playing for Devon FA has been so important for me. Just to represent your county and have that name behind your back, it's amazing. When you're playing for your county and helping them to succeed, it's so, so good. And being here, seeing everyone progress, everyone being together, I love that.

Devon FA is the main reason I got onto the England talent pathway. The England camp that I've just been on was incredible. Some of it was at St George's Park and some of it was at Loughborough. When I got there, I just looked around and I didn't know anyone, apart from two friends from Bristol. There was a big group of around eight girls who knew each other, they were all from Birmingham City and Aston Villa. When you first meet, they're all together and know each other.

And then it's just me, sat there by myself. But we all talked to each other, and I feel we all bonded so well. On the last day, coming out of camp, I knew everyone and I made great friends with Erin, the other goalkeeper who's from Sheffield. We were inseparable.

At that camp, I played half a game against Wales and the full game against Greece – and I kept two clean sheets, which was nice!





"Get involved, because you don't know where it's going to take you".

FREYA WEEKS

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Around a year ago, I trialled for Bristol City's Pro Game Academy. This was before they were promoted to the WSL. They train three times a week and play every Saturday. Compared to grassroots, it's so different. But I couldn't get in because I live so far away, and there are rules about distance. I understood it, but it annoys me. When Bristol got promoted to the WSL for this season it meant I could go to them as some of the rules and criteria changed. So this year has been better. I don't play for grassroots on Saturdays anymore, because I'm always at Bristol instead. I also go to the Women's FA High Performance Centre at Plymouth Marjon University. It's specifically for a group of goalkeepers, so it's really good for me to go to those sessions.

I feel it's so inspiring, seeing all the little girls playing football now. A girl at my sister's primary school asked me the other day, 'how does it feel to play in an England shirt?' She plays football as well and I said, 'you've just got to keep pushing, working hard on and off the pitch, focus on what you're eating, focus on your recovery and all these things, and you'll get to where you want to be.'

The first thing to do is to get involved, go to any club – because you don't know where it's going to take you. If you find you're getting good, trial for a bigger club, and if you get in, just work hard. And have fun! You want to find your voice and know that you're capable of making friends wherever you are. I feel if you're shy, you have to try and get out of that, so you can make friends and gain self-confidence and feel comfortable where you are.

Don't lose confidence in yourself just because of where you live. That's what I did for a while when the distance meant that I couldn't go to Bristol. But I've realised how big our game has become. I feel now that you can go to clubs that you didn't think you could go to. It's much different for girls today, compared to when I first started, because girls' and women's football has grown so much. England winning the Euros, and their games being shown on TV has helped that a lot, it's got so many girls interested in football. It had started to happen before the Euros, but it's really kicked on after that.



My number one hope for the future is to be at any higher club, winning trophies, and hopefully to be involved in the England set-up. Mary Earps has been a big inspiration for me, watching her come out of her shell.

She wasn't in a good place a few years ago, not being selected for the national team, and she's turned that around and has won so much. It shows what anyone can do if you just keep on trying and don't give up.



INSPIRING STORIES

ENHANCING LIVES THROUGH FOOTBALL IN DEVON



KIESHA WALKER



Age: 14

Position: Left Back

From: Plymouth

School: Ivybridge Community College

Current teams:

Devon FA Under 16's

SB Frankfort Boys



KIESHA WALKER



It was seeing everyone playing football at lunchtime at my primary school in Plymouth that got me interested in playing football. I was about nine-years-old at the time. Then a poster went up around the school about a new girls' team and I got signed up to it and started playing. I'd never kicked a ball around before. I remember my first training session. I just picked up a ball and was good with it. The other girls were shocked that I'd never played for a team or anything before. But as I'm getting older, it's sometimes hard to stay confident, seeing other players who are good, and having to improve myself so I can keep up with those standards.

My PE teacher, Mr Taylor, was a big inspiration, he really encouraged me to get involved in sports. He also helped me to be more confident and to express myself while playing football.

I joined Plymouth Phoenix Girls just before my 10th birthday. It was a very good team. Being in the team which won the ESF tournament, which qualified us to go to St George's Park, that was so good. We also played in the Devon County Cup Final against Ocean City. It was a really close game, it went to penalties, and we lost. But I was presented with the Player of the Match Trophy, which is my mum's favourite memory of me playing football.

But then there was a lot of restructuring of teams, which was very disruptive for all of us. Plymouth Phoenix became Hunters District Phoenix, and then the team went to SB Frankfort Phoenix. We didn't want to disband so all the girls moved together as a team to the new club. It meant we were able to stick together for three or four years.



"I had a whole year where I couldn't play because I couldn't go to training".

KIESHA WALKER

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We're a single parent family and I live with my mum and my younger brother. We don't have a car, so getting to training and games is sometimes hard. Not long after I joined Plymouth Phoenix Girls, I was asked to go to Plymouth Argyle to train, they just wanted to see me play.

I did three sessions, but then mum went back to work after having my brother. So I couldn't join the team. I had a whole year where I couldn't play at all with Argyle or anyone else, because I couldn't get to training. It was only when my mum left work a few years ago that I could do it. We'd catch two buses to get to training in Plymouth every Thursday night and then two buses back home afterwards.

This season, I decided to switch to SB Frankfort Boys, which was hard after playing in a girls' team for four years. But it's about pushing myself on development and improving my strength for the next two years before women's football.

I found that over-use was causing problems for my back and my knee, so I've dropped Sunday League and Plymouth Argyle this season, to concentrate on Devon FA, SB Frankfort and the girls and boys at school. It's about trying to find a balance.



KIESHA WALKER



I came to the trial at Devon FA when I started secondary school. I did well at the trial, and I've been with them ever since, playing in the Under-12s, Under-14s and now in the Under-16s. This is my fourth season with Devon. It's been really good because the training is high quality. It's more structured, and it pushes us individually, so I get a lot more support – including constructive criticism, which is improving my game a lot. The teams are also of a high standard, so being here is a massive step in helping me to get better and stronger. It also benefits me that the Under-16 coach at Devon is my PE teacher at school.

Getting to Devon FA training and fixtures can be hard – we catch a bus to Plymouth train station, a train to Newton Abbot, and then walk up to Devon FA, and then we do the reverse journey back. But I do it because I feel 100% committed to improving myself. It's important for me to try to get to all the training I can, so I can be the best I can be, and so I can contribute to my team.

There are regional talent days at Huish Academy, which can be tricky to get to as there's no public transport to get there from Plymouth. We've got lifts from other parents, and we support by paying towards the petrol. But without that support, we can't go. There was a year when my mum did a GoFundMe page to help, but now I've got a sponsor who's helping to pay for transport. The sponsor is Big Slice, who are an independent Pizza company from Plymouth who heard about me and wanted to find a way to help. We're so grateful to them. But if there's no public transport, it's difficult. I've also had to miss some Devon FA evening sessions at Ivybridge Community College because we need to get a lift back home afterwards, which isn't always possible. But I've managed to get to every game. The coaches at Devon FA understand how hard it is sometimes, to get to everything. They're very supportive.



"Believe in yourself, be confident, be positive".

KIESHA WALKER

KIESHA WALKER

I was nominated for the Regional Talent days and I did three regional events and a national event in 2022 and went to a national fixture and regional fixture in 2023. My next target is to work hard and be selected for an England camp. The England pathway holds Wednesday sessions at Plymouth Marjon University – strength and conditioning sessions, psychology sessions, and technical sessions on the pitch.

That's really helpful, because if I want to play for England, which is my big aspiration, I need to be able to play in the style that they want. Getting coached from them now will help me when I'm older because I'll know the style of play. And being able to play with older players, like Mia Endacott, benefits me because it makes me a better player. Mia inspires me a lot. She's from Plymouth and is playing for Plymouth Argyle Women and the England Under-17s. Seeing someone from where I live and who I know playing for England has made me think 'I can do that'.

When I first started, it was all about getting involved, talking to coaches, and going to training. This would be my advice to other young girls who want to play football. If you can't get to some training, then train at home on that day so you're still improving yourself. Just try to do the best you can. Believe in yourself, be confident, be positive, and get to as much training as you can. If you turn up and if you're committed, you'll get support. Look at what doors can be opened – and then step through. Because the pathway is here.



WANT TO GET INVOLVED IN GIRLS FOOTBALL?

Matt Hodgson, Devon FA Football Development Manager and Girls' Emerging Talent Centre Manager, said: "We've worked really hard in Devon over the past decade, and particularly the last 2-3 years, to grow the provision and opportunity for young female footballers with talent.

"We've got a model in the county now where there is better access to the talent pathway no matter where you live, or what your individual circumstances may be. Kiesha, Freya and Issi are three fantastic and inspiring examples for young girls in Devon, but we're so proud to say that there are numerous other players who have progressed through the pathway or are currently on this journey.

"With the level of talent significantly increasing year on year, we are so excited about the next generation of players coming through over the next 3-5 years. It's not always easy as we don't have some of the gigantic clubs you find elsewhere in the country. But we certainly feel like what has been created in Devon is going a long way to ensuring young girls with the talent and potential still have an opportunity."

For information on The Devon FA Girls' Emerging Talent Centre and how you could get involved with upcoming recruitment or trial events, contact Matt at matthew.hodgson@devonfa.com or visit www.devonfa.com.

