

FA NARRATIVE - Marzena Bogdanowicz, The FA's Head of Commercial & Marketing for Women's Football

On 21 October 2016 I attended my first ever England Senior Women's match at the Keepmoat Stadium in Doncaster. A goalless draw against France, in front of a crowd of 7,398. I was impressed with the crowd – particularly for a Friday evening – but deep down I knew we could be taking women's football to another level.

To achieve *The Gameplan for Growth's* goal of doubling the game's fanbase, The FA's Marketing, Commercial and Communications departments collaboratively set two central objectives – change perceptions and raise the profile of our England players and women's competitions.

Move on three years from that night in Doncaster to Saturday 9 November, 2019. The England Senior Women's team walked out in horizontal rain at Wembley Stadium against Germany in front of a record 77,768 fans, comfortably breaking the previous Wembley record of 45,619 [vs Germany in 2014]. I will forever remember the stadium packed with girls, boys, men and women of all ages and the masses of St George's flags waving. This had been a huge team effort and for the many who had worked tirelessly to grow the game over the years, it was hard not to be overcome with emotion.

The interest had been growing at a speed we had never seen before, and it was a journey that gathered unprecedented momentum during last year's FIFA Women's World Cup.

Our vision to change perceptions and raise the profile of our players was shared by our partners who in the build up to the 2019 World Cup provided fantastic support and exposure for the game. From Nike launching the first ever bespoke Women's kit at a star-studded launch in Paris, to the Lionesses emblazoned on Lucozade bottles across the nation's supermarkets - every one of our partners played an integral role.

The squad announcement was our first big moment and we used the profile and reach of 23 friends – including HRH The Duke of Cambridge – to announce the squad over a three-hour period on our @Lionesses twitter channel. The announcement reached 170 million people and was the beginning of our journey to capture the imagination of the nation. Our next focus was the day of the team's departure to France, where a personalised 'good-luck' billboard was placed in each of the hometowns of our 23 players. The foundations were laid and then the Lionesses let their football do the talking.

Our social channels created a unique link from France between the players and the fans, enabling us to tell the team's story on and off the pitch. This included the first ever *Lionesses Daily Show*, broadcast daily on Twitter from France and giving fans unprecedented access in camp. Established in 2016, the Lionesses' Twitter and Instagram channels now boast a collective audience of nearly 400k followers and are a key tool in our continued work to change perceptions.

The Communications team's commitment to helping team performance, freeing the players up to tell their story with a strong emphasis on positive media relations and proactive issues management,

created a closer connection between the players and fans, with the media as a vital conduit. Media coverage over the course of the tournament was measured in pages [front and back] not paragraphs. 165 journalists and photographers packed into our Semi-Final pre-match media day in Lyon. This was a far cry from the handful of hardy souls who covered the team in the early 2000s.

The BBC played a pivotal role. A first-ever behind the scenes documentary was broadcast ahead of the tournament, every Lionesses game was shown live on BBCOne and viewing figures continue to grow with every game. By the time the Semi-Final came around, the Lionesses were the big story and an incredible 11.7 million tuned in from home, pubs, parks and even Glastonbury to watch.

The Lionesses' memorable run to the Semi-Finals ended in heartbreak but we were all left with an enormous sense of pride for what they achieved and how far the game had come. We had been ambitious for the women's game but this exceeded our expectations in such a short period of time.

The World Cup provided a backdrop for an unprecedented acceleration of the women's game. Previously it has been difficult to transition the success on an international stage to domestic growth but this time it was different. The interest in the England team rubbed off onto our domestic leagues. The newly rebranded Barclays FA Women's Super League has benefitted from one of the biggest ever investments in women's sport, with Barclays showing their intent by becoming title partner. With superb support from the clubs, attendance records have been regularly broken and the domestic fanbase has more than doubled. There have been memorable days and 20,000 plus crowds at Anfield, the Etihad Stadium, London Stadium, Tottenham Hotspur Stadium and Stamford Bridge. The 3,072 average attendance of the Barclays FA WSL is a league record and even without the support of the games at the main club stadia, the average attendance is up by 34%. The growth was supported by the creation of the first ever Women's Football Weekend in November 2019, which capitalised on a break in the men's football calendar and encouraged fans to visit a women's football game at any level of the football pyramid.

Watching live has also grown beyond just those in stadia. Our partners BT Sport and BBC, alongside international broadcasters, committed to 100 hours of live league coverage in the 2019/20 season [compared to 28 hours live in 2016] and more people are watching league games than before with an average peak audience of 121,440 and a record peak of 270,000 for Chelsea vs Tottenham Hotspur in September 2019. The introduction of The FA Player has been a gamechanger for the league with nearly 100,000 subscribers from all corners of the world able to watch every game, and new international broadcast deals in Australia, Israel, Mexico & Central America and Scandinavia have shown the mass appeal is well beyond these shores.

This is a collective effort, with so many playing their part. The scale of media coverage has continued to increase. The majority of national papers have dedicated women's football writers and the introduction of women's football shows on Sky Sports News, Channel 4 and talkSPORT all give light to the growing profile we are working hard to build.

There is still a long way to go on our journey, it will not all be plain sailing and there is no doubt we are in the middle of a turbulent spell, but the direction of travel remains. The domestic game has never been stronger and winning the opportunity to stage the UEFA Women's EURO in 2022 gives us a platform to reach greater heights. We promise that we will be ready to make the most of this landmark opportunity when it arrives.

CASE STUDIES:

Niva Hersh – FA Player subscriber and international Barclays FA WSL fan

“After the FIFA Women’s World Cup in 2019, I started following the Barclays FA Women’s Super League from my home in Jerusalem. I didn’t have the opportunity to follow a local women’s team so it was great to hear I could follow a competitive league in England.

Last summer, I travelled to England and decided I wanted to watch a pre-season game between Arsenal and Tottenham at Borehamwood – it was amazing. Whilst I was there, I heard about The FA Player through another fan and realised I would be able to follow the league for free when I returned home to Israel.

As an Arsenal fan, the fact I can watch the games live through The FA Player means I’m able to have a bigger connection with the players and the team and be excited the moment one of the players scores a goal, rather than waiting for the highlights on YouTube.

I am a nurse at a local hospital in Jerusalem, so The FA Player gives me an outlet and distraction from my day to day job. Especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, the variety of content at a time when football is at a halt has given me something to smile about each week. I have really enjoyed watching old league and Lionesses games, behind-the-scenes content and the weekly *Coffee Club*. As I travel to work on local transport, the accessibility of The FA Player has also allowed me to catch up on games on my mobile whilst I am travelling.

Since following the Barclays FA Women’s Super League and using The FA Player I have made friends in Israel, the USA and the Netherlands and we now chat during the games, allowing me to connect with others who have the same passion. It’s a brilliant feeling knowing I can connect with people in different time zones as we all watch the live games through The FA Player together.”

Neil Langridge – Lionesses Supporters Club Member and father of an avid Lionesses fan

“Our journey supporting the Lionesses began when my ten-year-old daughter Charlotte was invited by her girls’ football team to the World Cup warm-up game between England and New Zealand at Brighton.

Charlotte and I are season ticket holders at Southampton FC, however as soon as we arrived at the stadium, I realised the atmosphere and experience of a Lionesses match was completely different and something I wanted to regularly take my football-loving daughter to in the future. From start to finish the experience was really family friendly and the icing on top of the cake was the access to the players who spent time walking round providing selfie opportunities and signatures. Carly Telford even gave us her match shorts.

We attended our second game when we made a 24-hour trip to Nice to watch England vs Scotland in the 2019 FIFA Women’s World Cup. This really was an incredible experience for us both and I absolutely loved sharing these memories with Charlotte. We joined up with the Official Supporters Club and when we arrived there was a real community feel. Seeing how much the tournament and win meant to the players and fans is something I’m proud that we were a part of. On our way home, our flight was delayed to nearly midnight and there were a lot of families with young girls there. I remember looking over to see a game of football break out with about 10 girls in the airport and at that moment I felt we were really part of the growing Lionesses’ fan community.

Finally, we joined the record-breaking attendance at the England vs Germany game at Wembley Stadium. I was joined by 30 players and parents of Charlotte's team, *Guildford Saints*, and it was a special evening for us all.

As a football fan the walk along Wembley Way is always a memorable experience, however seeing the joy on my daughter's face as she was about to watch her role models play at the home of English football was a moment I'll always treasure. The atmosphere was brilliant from the Fan Zones, to inside the stadium and the positivity, even though we lost, really made a difference. Hearing the National Anthem, seeing the team walk out, and joining in with over 70,000 fans who were all singing away was great fun for the young girls in the team.

The growth of the Lionesses team for young girls around the country is extremely important. It is providing girls with ambition, confidence and aspiration to follow in their role models' footsteps. Charlotte and I will certainly continue to follow the Lionesses on their journey in the coming years."

Maisie Threadgold-Smith – First-time fan at England vs Germany

"Previously I had never followed the Lionesses, even though I have played football since I was a little girl. However, I watched the SheBelieves Cup in early 2019 and the results and growth of the team made me excited and support the team at the FIFA Women's World Cup. After the tournament, I made the decision I wanted to attend a Lionesses game and experience it first-hand.

As soon as they went on sale, I managed to buy two tickets for the Germany game at Wembley Stadium in November. I knew it was going to be a big game as Germany are a good side and it was on my 21st birthday, so I thought there was no better time and place to attend my first Lionesses game.

After receiving my tickets, I was approached by the Lionesses Supporters Club to vlog my experience on the day. I filmed it all from start to finish, and even though I was nervous at first, it was a fun thing to do and made the occasion even better. From travelling on the train, to walking up Wembley Way and heading into BOXPARK, I was able to capture the excitement of visiting Wembley and my memories of my first-ever Lionesses game.

One of my favourite things were the Fan Zones as they really brought everyone together and the different activities they were hosting such as the 'keepy-uppy' challenge made it a fun experience. The fans all felt connected and I felt like part of a community with women's football the thing we all had in common. There were lots of families there and seeing the young girls in their football kits was adorable.

Inside the stadium, the atmosphere was incredible. Our seats were roughly 10 rows back from the pitch, so we were so close and able to really take in the atmosphere and experience. Watching the team who I had become so invested in since the World Cup, walk out at a sold-out Wembley Stadium - the home of English football - was something I will never forget. Hearing the team and the crowd come together to sing the National Anthem gave me the biggest smile on my face. The Lionesses team has raised the profile of women's football and I can't wait to continue supporting them and attending more games in the future."