

A: Did you watch the football on TV last night, Laurence?

B: Do you mean the men's English championship, Marc, or the women's international? The women, of course!

A: I thought so, I know you're a fan. But what did you think about this last year's women's world championship tournament? All played in France, of course.

B: It was a great chance to have the tournament in France which is more accessible for many of the fans. This should not only help the women's game in France but in other neighbouring countries. The United States team played well to beat the Netherlands and win the World Cup. I was sad England didn't reach the final.

A: I heard an interview with the England captain, Steph Houghton, and I was quite surprised that she said that she didn't watch much women's football, and that she preferred watching men's football. I think you would expect her to be a better ambassador for the women's game.

B: But the women footballers found it hard to get accepted, didn't they?

A: Yes, they did. In 1921, the British Football Association banned its members from allowing women's football to be played at their grounds, effectively killing the women's game overnight. While they could still play the sport, women were reduced to doing so at a recreational level. It took another half century until women's football got back on its feet. Then it was extremely tough without proper pitches and facilities. They had to be very determined.

B: I think Steph Houghton and the whole team have done a great job in promoting women's football in Britain. If she prefers to watch men's football in her private life then that's her choice. The FA were wrong to ban women's football, but at least it is good that they have woken up now. They allow good standard mixed football up to a certain age - because that's how you learn, by playing with other good people.

A: There's still a lot of resistance to Women's football. One former male professional said women's football will always be an "inferior product" unless smaller pitches, goals and balls are introduced to the game. He said "we have to accept that men and women are fundamentally different," and that the game should be "adjusted for women, physiologically, biologically".

B: It's not a view held by the England team. Houghton believes that one day, there is potential for men's and women's football to be on an equal footing. There were extraordinary viewing figures for the Women's World Cup over the summer, spectators in the grounds and watching on TV.

A: Yes, there were record-breaking television audiences for England at the Women's World Cup. And afterwards there was a big increase in fans of the women's game, with a large increase in pitch bookings by women's teams wanting to play.

B: Yes, television has an enormous influence and perhaps the upward spiral has begun. Women need to be respected and given the same platform to perform. By doing this the quality gets higher and higher and with that comes better live and television attendances, and sponsors. 46% of people who have been to a match were reported to have been surprised by how professional it was. 74% think it is underrated. There is clear evidence of professionalism and investment improving the quality of the play and increasing audiences.

A: How does that translate at the grass roots level? High level sport can't develop without the fundamentals of young players, both boys and girls, developing in the sport.

B: Things are moving. Here's one example; there is a football pitch booking site in the UK which saw a 200% increase in bookings for women's teams just before the World Cup. They are helping promote the women's game - they see it as a big growth market.

A: It's great to see, but like Steph Houghton I must admit there's still more pace and intensity in the men's best teams. But still, I'll be watching again the next Women's World Cup in 2023. Venue to be decided in June 2020!

Summary

The eighth women's football World Cup was held in the summer of 2019 in France, contested by the women's national teams of the member associations of FIFA. There were 52 matches staged in nine cities in France. The final was won by the USA. The discussion is about the tournament, attendees at stadiums and TV coverage, and the progress in the popularity of women's football: both for local games for adults and mixed teams for boys and girls. One other topic mentioned is the possibility of developing to equal the men's game, and whether women can match men physically in football.

Questions

1. Should women's football have smaller balls and pitches, recognising physiological differences?
2. In which sports do women generally excel?
3. Should men and women receive the same prize money in sport?
4. How important is television coverage for sport?