



# WOMEN IN SPORT REPORT

*SportBusiness*

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## WELCOME | A COMMERCIAL TIPPING POINT FOR WOMEN'S SPORT

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**Adam Nelson**  
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Long before it was over, 2017 was being hailed as a landmark year for women's sport.

It was 12 months which featured showpieces for two globally popular sports, in the ICC Women's Cricket World Cup and the Women's Rugby World Cup, while some of the best women's football teams in the world demonstrated their talents at the Uefa Women's Championship in the Netherlands.

More than the on-field events, 2017 was a crucial moment in the commercialisation of women's sport. In England – which played host to the cricket and rugby union – these events were impossible to miss, covered as mass-media moments for the first time in the history of the tournaments.

As this report will show, however, while the gap between women's and men's sport is narrowing, the pace of change has been glacial. In almost every aspect – media coverage, commercial revenues, attendance, participation – men's sport remains streets ahead, even in territories in which women's sport has progressed rapidly over the last decade.

The acid test may come in America. While the Women's National Basketball Association celebrated its 21st birthday last year with record-breaking crowds, it remains the only women's competition operated by any of the country's four traditional major leagues. Should any one of those sports receive major backing and catch fire – with recent attempts at professional women's football, soccer and ice hockey leagues all having foundered – it could usher in a new era of interest in women's sport in the world's biggest market.

While lip service must be paid to the benefits of sport for sport's sake, progress will ultimately be driven by commercial imperative. In Europe, for instance, the professionalisation of both France's Division 1 Féminine and England's Women's Super League football competitions is showing the way for other countries whose investment into the women's game has lagged behind.

The application of Manchester United to enter the WSL2 from the start of the 2018/19 season is a major development. The English giants have long resisted calls to revive their women's team, with speculation that senior figures in the club worried about their brand being devalued should the team fail to replicate the success of the men's side. This is likely to be what it will take across the world to bring women's sport to its full potential: top-level involvement from the biggest clubs and rights-holders in men's sport.

The theme that emerges from the articles in this report – some new, some updated and refreshed pieces from the SportBusiness archive – is that there is undoubtedly a boom waiting to happen. There is a huge audience, of both women and men, with an appetite to consume women's sport, and there is an ever-increasing range of professionalised clubs, leagues and tournaments owned by some of the world's biggest rights-holders. The challenge for the next few years will be to marry those two things together commercially. ○

## APPETITE FOR DISRUPTION | INSIDE WE ARE DISRUPT, A FEMALE-FOCUSED SPORT MARKETING AGENCY

- ▶ We Are Disrupt, an agency specialising in women's sport, was founded in 2017 by former CSM executive Emma Lax
- ▶ Agency aims to use sport to empower girls and women, both through participation and at a governance level
- ▶ Brands and rights-holders need to start treating women's sport as its own commercial opportunity



Jamie Squire/Getty Images

BY ADAM NELSON

**W**e Are Disrupt, a sports marketing agency which specialises in women's sport, celebrated its first anniversary in March 2018. After a successful first year – both for the agency and for women's sport – the agency's founder and managing director, Emma Lax, tells *SportBusiness International* how the opportunity arose, the early challenges, and her hopes for the next 12 months and beyond.

### How did the opportunity to start a women's sport marketing agency come about?

I was heading up women's sport at [Chime Communications-owned marketing agency] CSM at the time and met an angel investor who was really interested in the women's sport space as a private investment opportunity. The catalyst was demands from private investors to understand and realise the opportunity of women's sport, rather than a personal desire to set up a new business. It was

about communicating passion for the sector, and the investment landscape gave me that opportunity.

In March 2017 I left CSM and set up We Are Disrupt, which is backed by six angel investors and it's a real mix of people – there's an ex-international rugby player, there's someone who's built their own tech business, we've got someone who's built an advertising business. So a real range of backgrounds but they're all men, the majority of whom have daughters who are very passionate about sport so that is also a part of their desire to be involved.

**How have you positioned We Are Disrupt to the market in your first year of operation?**

We are very much an agency specialising in women's sport, and our depth of knowledge and experience within that space is our key niche. We've worked with brands like Canyon on their fitness products. They're primarily interested in how they engage with female consumers. All our clients either have a focus on engaging female consumers if they're a sport brand, or engaging consumers through women's sport as a platform or a passion point.

In terms of service areas it's really broad. The types of stuff we're working on is all sorts of things, from building investment strategies for new start-up businesses within the women's sport space – whether that's new international competitions to existing clubs that are looking to build off-shoot women's set-ups but are looking to approach it from a start-up mentality – through to commercial strategies. For Middlesex County Cricket Club, that was about understanding and auditing what they had from a women's cricket perspective as a whole club and helping them to understand how they go about growing and commercialising that. Then we do work in the more traditional space, so PR, digital, social and creative. We're working with Reebok on their ambassador strategy, we're working with

Canyon on PR events, which is a big space for us as well. Our niche is within the women's sports space, but we're really broad in terms of our service areas.

**Was there a specific gap in the market you felt was unfilled? Did you feel that women's sport was being poorly represented by existing agencies in the field?**

My background is in politics, which I studied, and then I worked on brand strategies outside of sport. It was in 2012 when I read about the gender gap in sports. At the time in the UK only five per cent of media coverage was of women's sport; one per cent of commercial investment went into women's sport. I also took notice of the low figures around female leadership across the sport industry. I did a lot of stuff on health policy at a very senior level in Scotland, but actually even when you're producing policy recommendations for ministers, the amount of time that takes to implement, to change behaviours, to see impact... for me, sport is a really effective platform to empower individuals directly, whether that's as participants or as fans, to achieve all sorts of goals. For me the driver was creating the quality of opportunity for women to access sport, whether as an athlete, as an administrator, as a fan, or as a participant – and realise all of the benefits of that.

I was told by a recruiter that I wouldn't be able to get a job in sport because I didn't have any experience and it's a very competitive market. The thing I was really passionate about at the time was increasing the visibility of female role-models so I launched a women's sport and fitness blog to do that and did a load of work with brands like Adidas, Nike, Puma on my own through that, then used that as a lever to get involved with sport, and it was very much about getting to understand the whole ecosystem of women's sport, what levers you can push to drive growth. Is it about driving media coverage?

Is it about driving private investment? Is it about thinking differently about commercial modelling around sponsorship? Is it about getting more female representation at governance level in sport? That helped me to understand the landscape a bit better and it shifted my mindset.

Rather than trying to push media to cover more female athletes, actually the things that I can influence that will have a big effect is talking with brands to understand how association with women's sport can help them to brand-build, and what it can offer over and above not just men's sport's properties but also above platforms that have been traditionally used to engage female consumers, so music, arts, culture. That prompted my move into CSM.

The opportunity to me was really simple: brands want to engage female consumers, the decision makers at the majority of brands are predominantly female, yet brands aren't using sport as a platform to engage those consumers. So that felt like a big missed opportunity. And then I was almost coming it at from a different mindset. I spoke to a football club last week and their strategy is very much around "we want to establish and grow our women's team but we can't drive commercial investment," so actually turning that on its head and saying, don't compare this to your set up on the men's side but think about the women's team as a commercial entity in its own right and approach it as if it were a start-up business. You have to look at what is actually appealing investors, to sponsors and to fans. I think we're reaching a tipping point where girls and women are forming a major target audience for sports-related brands.

**What are the major changes you've noticed in attitudes toward women's sport over the time you've been involved?**

I think the latest figures, which are a few years old



James Chance/Getty Images

now, show seven per cent of all sports coverage is of women's sport, rising to ten per cent when you look only at digital coverage. But since those numbers were produced there has been a massive change in terms of media coverage of women's sport, not just in terms of the volume but also the approach to coverage. I was involved in producing a lot of that research around media coverage, and what we also did was look at the style of imagery that was used, the language that was used, the tone and style around the media coverage of women's sport and how that differs [from men's sport]. The imagery for example was static, it wasn't very dynamic, it wasn't performance-focused, all of which was in contrast to men's sports.

Since then there's been a huge amount of work done not just to drive increased coverage of women's sport but also to change the way it's being talked about. I think that has changed, but I think there's still a really long way to go. It needs to be approached from loads of different angles. One of the things which the International Olympic Committee has done is produce guidelines for sports broadcasters for gender representation in terms of their storytelling around the Olympics. They've tried to find a different way to approach the problem, coming at it from a rights-holder,

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governing body perspective and saying, ‘how can we actually change the terms of how this property is received?’.

Rather than rights-holders seeing it as something that they have to do and waiting for the boom to happen, I’d like to see them thinking instead about how they can create a different commercial blueprint for the women’s side of their rights portfolio and see it as a commercial opportunity in its own right, and resource it appropriately.

### **What are the biggest challenges you’re facing as a female-oriented sports agency?**

The reality is that women’s sport is still a relatively early-stage industry. It’s building itself, so you need people who are willing to be visionary, to be disruptive, to think differently. A lot of the work we’ve done when we’ve been doing modelling for new competitions is looking back at the journey to professionalism for men’s sport, and how did that evolve, what were the catalysts, where did the investment come from? There’s lots of lessons to learn from that but the reality is that it’s a completely different landscape now. I think the rights-holders that do it well are those that think about women’s sport as a platform to innovate within sport overall. The benefit of women’s sport is that because there is less politics surrounding it, there is more space to be creative, to challenge how sport has traditionally been done. What I’d like to see is women’s sport being used as a platform to create the future of sport overall.

Because it’s a relatively new industry and because there are not a lot of brands who have invested heavily in this space, a lot of it is an education piece as well. A lot of brands want to use it to engage either a female consumer base or a mixed consumer base, so it’s about understanding who that audience is, what sport that audience is consuming, and how that compares. One of the big

questions that we get asked is ‘how does women’s consumption of sport compare to traditional passion points that we use to engage them such as arts or culture? And are there platforms out there of the right quality for us to use to engage them?’. If you’re coming at it from a female consumer perspective, what are the passion points that they engage with? The other thing with female consumption of sport is that it’s much more diverse than men’s. Men’s consumption is driven by football – if you look at international role models, the majority of male role models will be footballers – but if you look at women’s sport it’s much more varied. Part of what we do is helping brands understand what their consumer base is consuming and how they’re consuming it.

There’s a cliché that men’s football is hard to miss, women’s football is hard to find. We have data that shows women saying, ‘if you made it available on the right platforms and I knew it’d be the same quality as men’s sport, of course I’d watch’. People want it to be there, they’re just not being presented with the opportunities. If you were to create more parity in terms of how accessible they are and how much they filter through culture, the verdict is generally that women would prefer to be watching women’s sport.

The challenge is that a lot of the rights-holders don’t produce the same quality of event. If you’re a rugby fan and you’re used to going to watch men’s international matches, the quality of the experience that you get at a women’s international match won’t align with your expectations. There are really simple things, like from an experiential perspective, like branding, ticketing, your whole customer journey as a fan, which is just not as sophisticated as it needs to be. If we can make those small changes and pick that low-hanging fruit, we can really improve the all-round experience dramatically, which would be a huge step. ○



## SAME RULES, DIFFERENT GAME | THE FA'S MARZENA BOGDANOWICZ ON THE COMMERCIALISATION OF WOMEN'S FOOTBALL

- ▶ Bogdanowicz a key architect in creation of Team GB
- ▶ Establishment of Women's Super League allows for clearer commercial division between men and women's game
- ▶ Partners such as SSE and Disney have come on board specifically to work with the women's team



Linnea Rheborg/Getty Images

BY ADAM NELSON

**P**rior to her appointment as the Football Association's new head of commercial and marketing for women's football, Marzena Bogdanowicz's biggest achievement is one she worries is becoming forgotten.

Not because it was a failure – but because it has become so ubiquitous that people don't

remember a time it wasn't around. Team GB – the phenomenally successful rebrand and restructuring of the UK Olympic team, of which Bogdanowicz was one of the key architects – “has just become part of the general day-to-day life,” she says. “Everyone thinks it's always been there, but I can tell you it wasn't.”

Bogdanowicz's latest challenge is to bring that

kind of inspiration to the FA, to make England's women's football team as much a fixture of the national sporting landscape as the men's. If that seems like a pipe dream, Bogdanowicz stresses that at the time of Team GB's conception, "everyone thought I was crazy. We were tying up however many sports under one banner, which seems so simple, but nobody thought it would work."

If there are reflections of her previous work in the new role, there are also significant differences. "The Olympics has always been about sport for everyone, irrespective of gender, race or religion," she says. "Olympics doesn't isolate gender. It's all treated as one, men's and women's together."

"Football is a different challenge, in that it absolutely is open for all – irrespective of age, gender, race, religion – but we still have a slight hill to climb in terms of changing perceptions and beliefs that actually football is okay for women and girls to play, because it's just so dominated by boys and men."

2018 is a critical year for the women's game in England. 2017 saw not only a significant commercial and sporting restructure – involving the creation of the new two-tiered Women's Super League, with a fully professionalised top division – but also saw the Lionesses, England's senior national women's team, make headlines for the wrong reasons.

A run to the semi-finals in the Uefa Women's Championship was overshadowed by the scandal which led to head coach Mark Sampson losing his position after allegations of using racially abusive language toward players Eniola Aluko and Drew Spence.

The handling of the appointment of former England men's player Philip Neville as Sampson's successor, after several prominent female figures within the game were reported to have turned the role down, was also a PR disaster. Neville's fast-track into the role, despite his relative lack of experience,

became a further stick with which to beat the beleaguered FA.

### **Commercial division**

Nevertheless, Bogdanowicz feels that "the building blocks are now in place" for 2018 to be a landmark 12 months for women's football. "In general, I'd say the game is on an upward trajectory that none of us can quite believe," she says. "The change over the last five years has been incredible in terms of participation, broadcast, spectators, fans – all of those elements are really growing at a rate that is hard to keep up with, and one of our challenges is to keep up with it and keep ahead of the game. We've got so much to do and we are rushing like crazy."

The FA has outlined four key objectives for Bogdanowicz and the commercial team – "to signpost, to build profile, to change perceptions and ultimately to raise commercial value" – with the ultimate aim of doubling both participation and attendance in women's football.

She references the fact that WSL fixtures are now regularly receiving 1,000 fans per game, "a monster number" compared with other women's sports, as evidence that the foundations are strong, and argues the move to professionalise the WSL opens up a whole new range of commercial opportunities for both the league and its member clubs. Most crucially, Bogdanowicz feels, it allows for a greater separation in the way men's and women's football are marketed, a step that has been long overdue.

"You can't market the women's game in the same way as the men's game," she says. "It's the same rules, but it's a different game. You've got to change how you position it and how you market it and I think in the past it was, 'this is how we market and promote the men's game, so that's how we're going to do it with the women's game', and you can't do

that. There's been a sense of, 'If you sponsor the men's you get the women free' – it doesn't work like that.

"The WSL is absolutely separated, but if a partner from the men's game or someone who's interested in the men's game says they're interested, we wouldn't say no to that, we would work with them, but the key is that they have to have the commitment to the women's game. It's not a case of come into the men's game and then you get the women's game for free."

Dividing the commercial structure of the men's and women's games will allow Bogdanowicz and her team to work much more closely with brands and partners who are committed to women's football, and not just taking it as a bonus bolt-on to a wider FA partnership. Some partners – such as energy firm SSE and entertainment giant Disney – have come on board specifically to work with the Lionesses, while sportswear brand Nike have expanded their FA partnership to include the women's team but have already begun working on tailored, female-specific activations.

"We're looking at working with partners that want to go with us on a journey," says Bogdanowicz. "The first conversation with a brand is, 'what are you trying to achieve from a business perspective, what are your key objectives, how can we help in terms of the women's game to support your objectives and deliver against your objectives, what can we do for you?' Rather than, 'give us money and badge it.'

The process of engaging new partners will be much more of a collaborative effort than it has been in the past, Bogdanowicz says, noting that securing the right partner and taking a flexible approach to working with them is more important than just looking at the bottom line, with a greater focus on what each brand will get out of the partnership, always with an eye on the long-term

goals of the FA. Brands must have a specific goal they wish to achieve through the promotion of women's football, rather than just be looking for exposure through a popular national team.

"We can look at numerous opportunities that the women's game can offer a brand, be it challenging some of the cultural perceptions, building community programmes, or encouraging women into leadership positions," she says. "But if we understand what their objectives are, we can help them achieve them, which is why no single size fits all. The work that we're doing now with Nike, their recent campaign with one of the female players, that is just the start of where we're going with Nike and that is a huge opportunity."

While commercial value is maximised by engaging with partners who can bring something unique to the promotion of the women's game, Bogdanowicz says top-level integration between the FA's personnel and commercial teams remains vital to achieving the organisation's core goals – chief among them the promotion of the sport to girls and women.

"We now have more dedicated individuals that are working on the women's game specifically than we've ever had before, and they are very much integrated across the whole business rather than, 'that's the women's team, that's their job'", she says. "By integrating it, it's part of every day life, it's not, 'they do xxx (missing word?) over there.' It's integrated and that to me is crucial in terms of actually normalising the women's game."

### **Grassroots growth**

The professionalisation of the WSL also means the FA is working much more closely with its member clubs, and is relying on them to help open up the pathways to young girls interested in getting involved in football.

"The opportunity that a WSL club has, or

any club along that new pyramid, is to make a generation of girls active,” Bogdanowicz says. “We want to raise the profile of all the WSL players. They are football’s freshest stars, that’s what we are looking for, is to show all the players across all the teams, not just the Lionesses, but the pathway that we have. That is an amazing opportunity for young girls to get involved and come with us on that journey. We will build the profile of all the top players. We want them to be household names, we want young girls to aspire to be like a Lioness, behave like a Lioness.”

For now, the FA’s approach is largely a top-down one, with the focus being on promoting the WSL and the Lionesses in the hope that it will inspire a new generation of girls to take up the sport. There are plans in place, however, for further work at a grassroots level, where once again the FA is expecting its commercial partners to play a major role. SSE has already become the title sponsor of the SSE Wildcats, an initiative designed to encourage girls aged between five and 11 years old to get involved in football.

The partnership which has most excited Bogdanowicz is the tie-up with Disney, who she calls “the best storytellers around”. Disney will collaborate with the FA on Girls’ Football Week, which runs from 23rd to 29th April, helping the body communicate the value of football to young people across the country.

“To work with them gives us an opportunity to talk in a new way with a new narrative to young girls who we can’t otherwise reach,” Bogdanowicz explains. “We know how to talk football to a football audience, but they know how to tell a story to girls and boys and parents – because as much as we need to show girls about football, we also need to show boys that it’s okay for girls to play football. Disney can help us do that.”

While Bogdanowicz acknowledges the debt owed



Warren Little/Getty Images

to other sports, particularly the Olympic disciplines, in blazing a trail for equal representation between men and women, she sees the FA as “treading our own path” as far as football is concerned, and she wants England to be the example other associations look to in the future. The FA’s commitment to promoting women’s football, from the top level right down to the grassroots, is “extraordinary”, she says, and adds that since joining the FA she has been amazed by “the power of football.”

“More so than any other sport, football can make a generation of girls active,” she concludes. The FA and WSL, she says, have created “an incredible opportunity to really normalise football for girls, and the FA’s commitment is incredible in terms of the support across the board, internally and for all the stakeholders. That’s what I find really exciting.”

SportBusiness International will publish an in-depth report about women’s sport that will be available to subscribers on 26th March. [O](#)

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## “THE SPORTS WORLD IS TOO CLUBBY” | INDUSTRY HEADHUNTER ASHLING O'CONNOR

Ashling O'Connor, partner at Bird & Co, on a career that has taken her from sports industry journalist to headhunter and how her new company will help sports bodies to meet UK government diversity targets



INTERVIEW BY **BEN CRONIN**

I was at the *Financial Times* for four years. That was as the media correspondent, so I covered the media industry in the dotcom boom and bust and that's the basis of my contacts in the industry now. I then moved to *The Times* as a sports writer, randomly, but it was more to write about the business of sport. My first job for *The Times* was to get on a plane to Tokyo and go to the [Fifa] World Cup in 2002.

The idea was that I could see the story in the numbers and read a balance sheet and see, for

example, when Leeds United [football club] was about to go bust. You could see it in the numbers and they were about to [publish] their results the next day and I managed to get hold of someone who confirmed that Peter Ridsdale [the Leeds United chairman at the time] was going to resign and that the whole thing was going to go belly up. I asked the sports editor if it was a sports story and if we could get it on the front of the sports section and he trusted me.

Then the world moved on and a lot of people caught up and other people realised that the

accounts were a good source of stories. I think it reflects the growth of the sports sector generally. Sport is a business and it's a global entertainment business, so that's why, exponentially, the interest in it has grown as the sums of money have grown. The levels of corporate governance that are required are higher and the standards of professionalism are higher and the scrutiny is higher, so all of that adds up to a competitive space.

After that I worked for a board-level, generalist [headhunting] firm called Inzito partnership. It was doing the same [as Bird & Co] in terms of board and senior-level appointments, but it was across lots of sectors, so it was generalist rather than focused on one section of industry. But Bird & Co just focuses on media and entertainment and consumer brands really; it is more specialist because the world is becoming more specialist.

There are headhunters for headhunters, I discovered, and the recruitment industry is also disruptive and diversifying and looking for people outside their natural pools. Actually the skills of journalism are quite transferable to executive searches because it's about networking and being around things and having a strong contacts base and being able to understand an industry. Basically, you've got a beat like you have in journalism and, if you're on top of that, you know what is going on and you know all of the right people.

It's not by accident that really brilliant, talented people get positions and also get onto boards. There is a process to go through. I think most people recognise now that the more diverse the board, the more effective the company is, and it is statistically proven that a board is more in touch with its consumers and customer base and is more profitable and gives a better return for investors. That's not just gender [diversity] but generational as well. I just think that having covered sport for the best part of 15 years it feels a bit like industries

such as banking were 40 years ago: a bit too clubby and that we need to look a bit more widely beyond ourselves and encourage more outsiders in.

I don't know how much leeway there will be [in the UK government's recommended higher diversity targets for sport], or whether there will be any grace period, but the targets come into effect from April and many sports aren't even achieving the recommended 25-per-cent target for the proportion of females on their boards. Money's tight at the moment and any excuse to cut funding will be sought, so sport's got to be prepared for that. Whether it's making sure the women in your own ranks could be board-ready, or importing that talent from outside, they've got to do it.

When the rules are changing – and it was the same in the City [of London] – you need to give people the tools to respond. You can't just say you're going to make companies have a third of their boards female and punish them if they don't. I think that's slightly counter-productive.

People have to be appointed on merit, but if the pool you are choosing from in the first place is not diverse enough, that's the problem. I don't believe there's a shortage of talented women, I just don't believe people are looking hard enough. If you're presenting a list of 10 people to a client and it's only got two women on it, you're reducing the chances of a woman being appointed.

I think [what the UK government is doing] is all positive because there has to be impetus from somewhere. You can have a debate over quotas but these aren't really quotas; they're targets that focus the mind. Sweden made it compulsory for companies to have a certain number of female directors, rather than aspirational, but they probably did it too quickly so they didn't have enough candidates to fill enough positions. However, it seems to have worked in the long run. Everyone needs targets and deadlines. ○

## IT'S A WOMAN'S WORLD | MARKETING THE ICC WOMEN'S WORLD CUP

- ▶ Sachin Tendulkar employed as an ambassador to grow the women's game
- ▶ Ticket ballot creates sense of demand outstripping supply
- ▶ Advertising campaigns are not women-specific



Shaun Botterill/Getty Images

BY **DOMINIC BLISS**

In an era of growing female participation in cricket are growing, the International Cricket Council had big plans to build on the momentum with the 2017's Women's World Cup.

For cricket legend Sachin Tendulkar, the appeal of the tournament for a global audience is clear.

"They are skilful players," said Tendulkar, an ambassador for the tournament, which took place

at five venues across England in June and July 2017. "They are competitive. They fight hard and in the right spirit. Why wouldn't you want to be there? I think you need to have a closer look at yourself in the mirror and ask yourself a strong question: 'Are you a cricket fan? Are you a cricket lover?' If yes, then you'd better be there."

The official launch event ahead of the tournament took place on 16th March in the Long Room at Lord's Cricket Ground in London, with HSE

Cake as the sports agency in support.

It was International Women's Day, but more significant was the location – the Long Room, which women were not allowed to enter until 1999.

### Marketing

Having Tendulkar at the launch was a coup and his championing of women's cricket has no doubt helped the female code, especially in India where millions of fans hang on to his every word.

"The girl should have the freedom to make her own choices and if a girl wants to go out and play [cricket] she should have the freedom to go out and play and enjoy herself," he said. "If we all get together and support them and encourage them to do whatever they want to do in life, I am sure the results will follow."

When it comes to ticket sales for the World Cup, the ECB decided to promote the final very differently to the group matches. Tickets for the final went on sale back in October last year through a ballot. "In itself, the ballot builds a promotion," explained Zarah Al-Kudcy, head of marketing of ICC global events at the ECB. "The concept of a ballot strategically, or maybe psychologically, suggests that the demand exceeds supply."

By late April 2017, 12,000 tickets for the final had already been sold. Ahead of time, Al-Kudcy suggested that a 24,000-seat sell-out was a genuine prospect: "I appreciate that's a bold statement but that's what we're aiming for," she said. Ultimately, Lord's was indeed packed out, with a capacity crowd watching England's triumph over India.

Tickets for the group-stage matches and the semi-finals proved understandably not as popular. Their release coincided with the official tournament launch in March. What was notable was how cheap they were, with general admission tickets priced at £10 (€12/\$13) for adults, £5 for students and just £2 for under 16s – great for the fans, but some saw

this as devaluing the entire tournament. Rather like budget airlines, travel to the venue is likely to cost more than the ticket itself.

Al-Kudcy explained how the tournament was deliberately scheduled to take place during term time rather than school holidays in order to attract as many school visits as possible. "For weekday matches, we expect to have a lot more children attending," she says. "Most of their money will go on the bus [to the game]. The last thing we want to have as a barrier is the ticket price. Being free would totally devalue it but the price of £2 doesn't act as a barrier."

The ICC also wanted ticket prices to be similar to those at T20, county and women's matches staged at the same venues at other times of the year.

### Targeting

The ECB hired London-based sports marketing agency Two Circles to advise them on ticket sales. Al-Kudcy stresses how the event didn't want to make the mistake of targeting just female ticket-buyers.

"We haven't primarily gone after women and girls," she adds. "Yes, we want more women and girls to play cricket, but we recognise that doesn't necessarily mean they're going to come and watch cricket. If you look across sport, there's normally a majority of men and boys watching sports events. So, we're making sure we haven't gone down that road of just talking to women and girls."

Interestingly, when Al-Kudcy spoke to SportBusiness International, 61 per cent of those who had already purchased tickets for the World Cup final were male, although many of these were group purchases.

The media campaign for the Women's World Cup was also not female-specific. Al-Kudcy gave the example of how they turned down promotions in women's magazines and opted for a mainstream





Shaun Botterill/Getty Images

newspaper, the Evening Standard, instead. Similarly, there was no specific Women's World Cup presence across social media platforms. On Twitter, Instagram and Facebook, the Cricket World Cup accounts rotate biannually between the men's and women's World Cups without changing their handles.

Not that the ECB plans to ignore female-specific promotions altogether. Since Father's Day falls on June 18 in the UK, just six days before the Women's World Cup started, the organisers contemplated a Father's Day promotion to encourage dads to attend matches with their daughters.

They also knew there would be huge interest among Britain's South Asian communities. Whenever India or Pakistan play cricket in England, the Anglo-Indian and Anglo-Pakistani fans come out in force. Pakistan played five of its group-stage matches at Grace Road in Leicester, home to

Leicestershire County Cricket Club. Al-Kudcy says the ECB managed to piggy-back on the club's "really proactive" marketing operations to attract local fans of Pakistani heritage.

She also encouraged Mayor of London Sadiq Khan – whose parents emigrated from Pakistan to the UK – to lend his support to the event. After all, he is renowned for being a huge cricket fan, he has two daughters, and the final at Lord's came under his patch. Plans were scuppered, however, by the snap election called by prime minister Theresa May in May of last year.

### Success

Aside from ticket sales, a sign of the tournament's overall long-term success will be whether British girls are encouraged to take up cricket after watching the action.

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Together with England Hockey and England Netball, under the banner of TeamUp, the ECB has launched a three-year campaign “designed to grow the fan base for women’s sport” in the UK “and ensure that every seven to 13-year-old girl will have the opportunity to benefit from team sport in school.” Schoolgirls will be invited to participate in coaching sessions with World Cup players, match-day national anthem ceremonies, and soft-ball cricket festivals.


The ICC also wants to use the event to increase female cricket participation globally. From its base in Dubai it held the first Women’s Cricket Forum in April 2017, “to accelerate the growth of the game”.

“There are many challenges,” said Clare Connor, former England all-rounder and chair of the ICC Women’s Committee. “Notably the traditions of the game and the perceptions that cricket is a game played by men and run by men.”

Connor stresses how the future of women’s cricket relies on both grassroots development and the professional women’s game, and how the latter has the potential to reach huge female audiences through TV, online streaming and social media.

All of which begs the question: could women’s cricket ever equal men’s cricket in global popularity?

“We shouldn’t compare the two,” insisted Claire Furlong, manager of strategic communications at the ICC. “What we want to see is cricket growing in popularity around the world.”

Tendulkar offers a similar message. “First of all, there should not be any comparison. Men’s or women’s sports, we should all have the freedom to get into the playground and express ourselves, without being constantly judged or compared. People have this tendency to compare sportspersons from one era to another era; men against women. We don’t need to do all that.” 



David Rogers/Getty Images

## YEAR OF PROGRESS | CAN SPORT BUILD ON A SUCCESSFUL 12 MONTHS FOR WOMEN'S EVENTS?

- ▶ The 2017 Women's Rugby World Cup saw a 53:47 gender split in ITV audiences in the UK
- ▶ Crowds of 50,000 attended the first few games of the new AFL Women's Australian Rules tournament
- ▶ Women's sport still makes up only 7% of all sports media coverage in the UK

BY **JOHN REYNOLDS**

**T**he well-worn maxim that women's sport only has a 16-day window every four years to inspire generations of girls to play sport was blown out of the water in the summer of 2017, when millions watched the Women's Rugby World Cup, ICC Women's World Cup of cricket and Uefa Women's Championship in football.

The BBC, Eurosport, NBC, ARD and PTV Sports were among a multitude of global broadcasters that showcased the performances of stars such as England's Anya Shrubsole, the Netherlands' Anouk Dekker and the US's Naya Tapper, while new sponsors helped finance the summer spectacles

which enticed legions of new female and male fans.

These big global competitions may have snatched the headlines over 2017 - a period shorn of an Olympics or major men's football tournament - but observers believe there has been a steady "drumbeat" powering women's sport for many years, both on and off the field.

Australian rules football has launched a professional women's league, teams in the National Basketball Association (NBA) and National Football League (NFL) have appointed female coaches and female sports journalists around the world are becoming more prominent. In the UK, the Football Association (FA) and the England and Wales Cricket

Board (ECB) have made bold statements about investing in women's sport.

"It feels like there is one big tell-tale sign after another that we are getting there," says Laura Gentile, ESPN's senior vice president of espnW & Women's Initiatives. "We are not there; we are still quite a way from being equal [to men]. But it feels like it's at the strongest and most consistent level than ever before."

Women's sport is clearly on the up, but sponsorship spend, broadcast hours and media coverage are still so heavily skewed towards male sport that a summer of triumph could soon become a mere footnote unless stakeholders build upon this momentum.

Andy Kenny, managing director, CAA Sports Consulting, says: "It's obviously great momentum. But you need to put it in context with where it's at with men's sport. Between seven and ten per cent of media coverage is on women's sport. And at the end of the day, brands are looking for profile and media coverage."

### Gender split

Securing a primetime UK broadcast slot on ITV for the Women's Rugby World Cup final – which attracted an average audience of two million, which is double the ratings of many Premier League matches on pay-TV channels – may have been a coup, but for World Rugby's general manager for the women's game, it was just one of a number of achievements.

Katie Sadleir, general manager, says: "There was a 53:47 split for most of the games between men and women watching. So men are watching women's rugby."

Such a near gender split, says Sadleir, would factor heavily into conversations World Rugby will have with new prospective sponsors for the women's game.

The big appeal for sponsors, like accountancy firm EY, which was lured in to sponsor the World Cup, is that women's rugby gives brands a reach into a demographic who are a household's key purchasers.

There has been a buzz around women's rugby for a numbers of years, helping it raise the profile level of sponsors for last year's World Cup. Now Sadleir believes it can up the ante.

"Given the rise in talent and the number of viewers, we believe we can sit down with corporates where there is a close alignment in brand values," Sadleir says. "We are definitely looking to stretch that commercial programme."

The triumph of the World Cup, observers say, has helped shift the perception of rugby as an elitist, male-dominated sport into one which can be played by women and girls across the world, aided by encouraging words by their male counterparts.

Dylan Hartley, England's men's rugby captain, paid tribute as the women's team prepared to face New Zealand in the final in Belfast. "They've got their own story, we're writing ours," said Hartley. "I'm envious that they get to play a World Cup final. I will be watching because I won't actually be playing."

Sadleir, who represented New Zealand at the 1984 Olympic Games and won a medal at the 1986 Commonwealth Games in synchronised swimming, says the fervour around women's rugby is here to stay.

It's not just the razzmatazz around the World Cup, she says, but rugby training programmes taking place in non-traditional heartlands, including India, Vietnam and the Caribbean, which indicate its rude health.

### Future survival

"It's been a fantastic year for women's sport," says Mark Lichtenhein, chairman of golf's Ladies European Tour (LET). "There is a general tailwind



Stuart Franklin/Getty Images

behind the sport which I would like to think we are very much part of?”

Record crowds gathered at Des Moines Golf and Country Club for the 2017 Solheim Cup, while star names competed in the Ladies Scottish Open. But women's golf is still reeling from the economic crash of 2008, with some reports suggesting that the tour is close to collapsing.

“We did lose a number of tournaments in the financial crisis. This is clearly the weakness we have at the moment,” says Lichtenhein. “We have rebuilt a little outside Europe but we need to rebuild within Europe particularly at the beginning part of the schedule. This is our absolute number one priority.”

To bolster its position, the LET is considering tie-ups with the men's European Tour and the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA), its US equivalent.

“It's a blank canvass in terms of the best way to do it. It's in everybody's interests that we have as competitive a European tour as possible,” says Lichtenhein.

“We will explore the ways that can be done. If it means bleeding more tournaments that's obviously what we need to do. That is our primary objective in the short term.”

Crucial for the LET's future survival is luring in sponsors in a cluttered, male-dominated sports market.

It's a “tough market,” adds Lichtenhein, but he believes there are reasons to be optimistic, pointing to the example of left-of-field sponsor Estrella Damm, the beer brand, backing the recent Mediterranean Open.

### Record crowds

While less noted on a global stage, there were record crowds in attendance last year for the first games of the inaugural AFL Women's (AFLW) Australian Rules football season.

The launch bought the game onto a professional footing and elevated it on to the same level as soccer and cricket in Australia.

Crowds of 50,000 attended the first few games and Australians from all corners of the country were glued to their television screens.

Domestic broadcasters Foxtel and Seven Network signed up as partners while National Australia Bank inked a naming rights deal said to be worth between A\$2m and A\$3m (€2.0m/\$2.4m) a year.

All the signs are pointing towards AFLW being a success, but its boss is remaining circumspect.

“I'd like to remind everyone this is year one [and] 176 women making their debut this weekend carry an extraordinary amount on their shoulders,” said Gillon McLachlan, chief executive of the AFL, ahead of the launch.

### Significant sea change

For women's sport to flourish, rights holders and associations, sponsors, and broadcasters must be on the same page.

In 2014, ESPN faced embarrassment when it was revealed that its flagship programme SportsCenter dedicated just 2% of its airtime to women's sport, part of a wider investigation into women's sport which painted the network in a damning light.

ESPN might argue it was unfairly singled out and, in its defence, can point to its dedicated women's sport channel, espnW, and the screening of a raft of college and professional women's sport.

Gentile believes there is a significant sea change afoot, and that women's sport is more part of the "sports conversation" than ever before, a momentum which she thinks harks back to the women's 2011 Fifa Women's World Cup in Germany.

This momentum is beyond the playing field, she says, pointing to Becky Hammon becoming the first full-time assistance coach in the NBA and Jennifer Welter becoming the first female coach in the NFL.

"There has been this steady drumbeat of momentum," Gentile says. "There have been big female accomplishments and quite a lot of discussion about women's roles within sports media."

She points to a flurry of women's sports which are generating strong audience numbers on ESPN.

"Women's college softball, volleyball and basketball have grown for us. International soccer for women and our US national team always rate strongly when there is a marquee event. And then the tennis grand slams are a winner," she says.

### New audiences

In recent years, Gatorade, Nike, Procter & Gamble and Toyota have been among the brands that have made significant investments in backing women's sports teams or individuals, realising that they can

### 2017 WOMEN'S RUGBY WORLD CUP STATS

TV audience peak:

# 3.2m

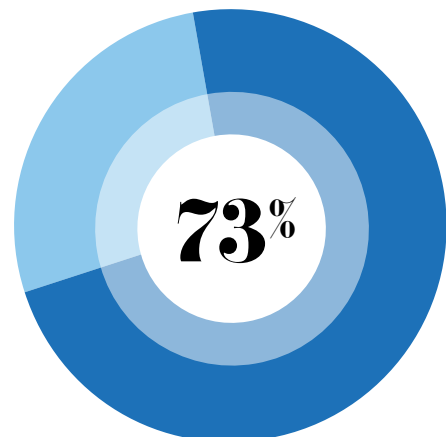
France v England (semi-final)

TV audience peak for final:

# 2.65m

England v New Zealand

The US, UK, France and Ireland all reported record viewing figures



of social media users under the age of 24

# 63,000

users of #WRWC2017

# 600,000

unique users visited  
www.rwcwomens.com

reach new audiences.

On a more local level, women's cycling in the UK may not be a sporting colossus but for the UK energy supplier Ovo Energy it represents a good fit as part of a foray into cycling sponsorship. The company, which focuses on sustainability and smart technology, is the sponsor of the 2017 Women's Tour and the Tour of Britain.

It comes at a time when cycling in the UK is growing, particularly among women, with more than two million people across the country now cycling at least once a week, according to British Cycling, the sport's governing body in the UK.

"When you look at cyclists it's clear that they are more likely to be early adopters; progressives with a green mindset," Adam Rostom, chief marketing officer at Ovo Energy, says. "The fit between cyclists and our proposition is clear, so our sponsorship of cycling makes great sense."

Furthermore, Rostom says that sponsoring men's and women's cycling helps underscore the values of inclusivity and diversity that the company likes to be associated with.

Gauging the success of the sponsorship will reveal itself over time, but Rostom says the early indications are that it has been a success.

### Crucial juncture

Women's sport, both for individuals and teams, is at a crucial juncture. The highs enjoyed this summer have undoubtedly taken women's sports such as cricket, rugby and football to a new level, but whether that momentum can continue remains to be seen.

It needs buy-in from the sporting ecosystem, and observers believe it would be helped by improved gender equality in the higher echelons of sporting bodies.

A spokesperson for UK-based campaign group Women In Sport, told SportBusiness: "Half of



Michael Dodge/Getty Images

sport's governing bodies [in the UK] are failing to meet the target of 30% women on their boards, and nine have no female representation at all."

Broadcasters are making inroads into showcasing more women's sport, but the startling fact remains it makes up only 7% of all sports media coverage in the UK.

That said, the days of media coverage, be it in the press or TV, driving audiences and dictating the fortunes of individual sports are long gone as Lewis Wiltshire, consulting partner at digital consultancy Seven League, points out.

"What matters most is that organisations now have control over their own messaging and are able to broadcast directly to their own audiences and fans," says Wiltshire. "They can do that via their own websites, apps and social media accounts. If you are a fan of England Netball and interested in tickets for the World Cup you can have that conversation with England Netball independently of traditional media."

Sporting organisations may be able to bypass the media but they can't bypass other stakeholders, such as sponsors and governing bodies, whose support they will need to ensure a buoyant future for women's sport. ○

## LEADERSHIP | BILLIE JEAN KING AND THE ROOTS OF THE WTA



No person is better placed to comment on the development of the WTA (Women's Tennis Association) than its founder Billie Jean King. In this archive interview from 2013, she tells **Kevin Roberts** how it all began and discusses the direction of women's tennis in the intervening years

Mark Kolbe/Getty Images

**F**orty years ago, Billie Jean King's patience had snapped. Patronised by the tennis establishment and jilted by her male equivalents in the sport, the 29-year-old was well aware that galvanising her disgruntled peers for a meeting at London's Gloucester Hotel was likely to mark the final chance for her to launch a determined assault on an inherently unequal system.

After the last of the underpaid and unappreciated women's tennis stars filed into the room, King turned to Dutch player Betty Stove.

"I said to her, 'Betty, lock the door,' and it was at that point that I knew there was no going back," King tells *SportBusiness International*.

By the end of the meeting, those present had signed their names to bylaws drawn up by King's attorney husband at the time, Larry. Those signatures of commitment would lead to the creation of the WTA, and an irrevocable change to tennis' landscape.

Sport, as is always the case, refused to stand still. One week later, the Wimbledon Championships got underway, and two weeks after that, King claimed the third of her four titles at the All-England Club. However, the fact that this year's Wimbledon women's singles champion will receive £1.6 million – the same prize money as the men's champion and more than 530 times the value of the measly £3,000 cheque picked up by King for her triumph at SW19



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40 years ago – is testament to the work of King and her revolutionaries.

Four decades may have passed since Stove locked that door at the Gloucester Hotel, but the emotions for King remain as raw as ever.

“I was scared, for sure,” she says. “I was very afraid, in fact, because we didn’t know the future, but we had a vision and a dream. We were taking the sport from amateurism. When we finally established the WTA, things finally calmed down. It solidified everything. Looking back, it was a huge moment at the Gloucester Hotel in June 1973.

“Everyone in that room knew that we were all paying a very dear price. We all spent an enormous amount of time and effort to persuade others of the cause. A board was formed, and then we selected players who we thought could, in turn, influence a couple of other players each, and told them to go out and do just that. I remember that we had a very good plan and Larry, my former husband, had all of the bylaws written out. We knew it was important that people in that room signed something so they would commit to it.”

Those frustrations of 1973 were borne out of years of poor management from tennis’ archaic administrators, who oversaw irregular tours and controversial seeding systems whilst slipping under-the-table payments to players who often had to supplement their on-court careers with second incomes. In 1970, King collaborated with fellow stars Valerie Ziegenfuss, Nancy Richey, Jane Bartkowicz, Kristy Pigeon, Judy Dalton, Kerry Reid, Rosemary Casals and Gladys Heldman to form the ‘original nine’ who rebelled against the United States Lawn Tennis Association and set up their own tour of eight professional tournaments.

By 1971, membership of King’s group had swelled from nine players to 40, paving the way for the creation of the Virginia Slims Circuit, which ultimately evolved into the WTA Tour.

“It was a tumultuous time in the early 1970s,” says King. “I think about the others who really cared and thought about it and changed the sport for the better. I may have been the leader in the movement, but we had all been ostracised and we were a team, and I don’t think the others ever got the credit that they deserved. We wanted to be cohesive and we knew we would be stronger together.”

### **Power struggles**

At the time of the WTA revolution, the men’s game was also undergoing its own internal power struggle. In 1973, a year after the Association of Tennis Professionals (ATP) was formed, 81 of the world’s top players boycotted Wimbledon to protest the suspension of Nikola Pilic, who was accused of refusing to play for his country, Yugoslavia, in the Davis Cup.

Later that year, King took up a challenge from former professional Bobby Riggs (pictured, below-right) in the so-called ‘Battle of the Sexes’ match in front of an estimated TV audience of 90 million. King, who was initially reluctant to take up the challenge, won in straight sets, but later said that she feared a defeat at that sensitive juncture would “ruin the women’s tour and affect all women’s self esteem”.

Happily for King, she claimed a victory that remains more famous than any of her 12 grand slam singles titles, although the exhausting tension on her face is clear to see for anyone who looks back at the grainy footage of the match. Tensions between men and women in tennis were not restricted to that memorable night in Houston, though. In the early 1970s, winners of men’s tennis tournaments frequently earned four times as much as their female counterparts.

However, King bristles at the suggestion that she was driven by a desire to change the outlook of women’s sport. “You never hear someone tell a male



Michael Luccisano/Getty Images

athlete that they've done a lot for men's sport," she says. "You always want to create more opportunities and empower others, but it wasn't about fighting for women - I was fighting for equality. Women were getting a third of the prize money that men were receiving at the time. If it had been the other way round, I would have supported the men.

"A lot of people don't understand that we were rejected by the men in tennis back then. I offered to help them out. I thought about what we could do if we joined together as a single force off the court. It would have been a huge media opportunity. I truly thought that we could do things together, and who knows what would have happened if they had agreed to it. But they turned us down, and I think they made a big mistake.

"So doing all of this and creating the WTA was, from a personal perspective, plan B. One thing about life though is you need to be able to adapt.

When the men rejected us, we knew everything was entirely in our own hands. In that situation, you find out what you are made of, because you are either going to make it happen or you're not. We knew it was our job to shape the future."

With destiny in its own hands, the WTA has never looked back. This year, the tour will stage 54 tournaments in 33 countries, while the WTA has contracted revenues of \$206 million in the current four-year cycle through to 2016. Even some of the sport's most traditional administrators have softened over time. In 2007, Wimbledon and Roland Garros finally became the last of the grand slams to offer equal prize money to men and women. However, King insists that there is still work to be done.

"Men have controlled 95 per cent of the media for as long as we can remember, and it's really important to realise that, from childhood, we have

seen the world through the eyes of men,” she says. “I think people are starting to wake up to that fact. I think this sport gives women self confidence so they think about themselves differently. When you talk about the equal prize money, it’s not about money. It’s about the message. However, when I flick through the pages of some newspapers, it is very difficult to find anything about women’s sport. It’s a difficult mindset to change.”

King’s words are particularly pertinent given the intriguing tale women’s tennis has to tell in this golden era for the sport. The current top 10 players in the WTA rankings all hail from different countries, while intense competition at the summit means that tournament winners have never been so difficult to predict. It is a thrilling time to follow the sport, and King is delighted by the string of multi-national, commercially-successful superstars that are driving women’s tennis towards a brighter future.

“When we set up the WTA we wanted it to be as global as possible, so we had players from across the world involved,” King adds. “Isn’t it wonderful to see so many nationalities at the top in the WTA rankings now? I want everyone to have access to the sport, and we haven’t even really got into the grassroots of Africa and parts of Asia yet. Can you imagine when we do? Holy camoly.

“It’s good to stop and celebrate what has happened over the past 40 years, and what [WTA chairman and CEO] Stacey Allaster has done, and what Larry Scott did before Stacey, is fantastic for the WTA. But I’ve never been one to look back really, and the focus should always be on the future because it’s an exciting future.” King, who mentors youngsters who dream of following in her footsteps, says she is helping to “pass on the baton” to the next generation.

“When former players give advice to youngsters, it helps to give them perspective,” she says. “Keeping the generations connected is very



Getty Images

important as the more you know about your history, the more you’ll learn about yourself. When I was an amateur I used to sit and watch players and ask myself, ‘why didn’t the women get together in the 1950s and 1960s to do something?’ Why didn’t they form the WTA then?

“But the next generation need to be aware of their opportunities. The global sponsors the sport has now are fantastic, but I always tell youngsters that money doesn’t necessarily make you a good person. Whenever I speak to young players now in the sport, I tell them that they are living the dream. Each generation needs to stand on the shoulders of the generation before them, and I am very proud of my generation.”

Forty years young, with the foundations in place to make dreams become a reality for the next generation of Billie Jean Kings. Not bad at all for a plan B. ○