

4563 Beauties who bent it before Beckham

GIRLS WITH BALLS

by Tim Tate

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JANE SHILLING

SAMUEL Johnson, the great 18th-century lexicographer and all-round know-all, once remarked that a woman preaching was like a dog walking on its hind legs: 'It is not done well, but you are surprised to find it done at all.'

Until very recently, a similar air of Olympian amusement surrounded the subject of women's football.

The Football Association had much to do with the exclusion of females from football. As Tim Tate observes in his entertaining history of the women's game, the Association stoutly resisted the affiliation of what it called 'ladies' football' until 1992, a year after FIFA launched the first Women's World Cup.

But the impression that the history of women's football began only a couple of decades ago couldn't be more wrong. At the beginning of the 20th century, women's football was a major spectator sport, drawing vast crowds and raising thousands of pounds for charity.

On May 9, 1881, the Glasgow Herald carried a report of a Scotland v England football match at Easter Road. The Scottish team wore 'blue jerseys, white knickerbockers, red stockings... and high-heeled boots', while the English team were similarly got up, but with blue-and-white jerseys and blue stockings. The Scots won 3-0.

Three weeks later, a return match was played in Glasgow, urged on by a crowd of 5,000, yelling 'Go it, Fanny!' and 'Well Done, Nelly!'. But the game ended in chaos after a pitch invasion, and the players had to flee in an omnibus drawn by four grey horses.

After this lively beginning, women's football faded from view, only to reappear in 1895, when the Westminster Gazette reported: 'A number of sturdy young ladies have recently banded themselves together for the purposes of carrying on a football club exclusively for representatives of the fair sex.'

THIS time the atmosphere, both within the sport and in wider society, was very different. The President of the British Ladies' Football Club was Lady Florence Dixie, an advocate of the rational dress movement, which campaigned to free women from corsets and crinolines.

'In that school of the future which, looking ahead, I see arising on the golden hilltops of progress above the mists of prejudice,' she wrote in 1895, 'football will be considered as natural a game for girls as for boys.' She couldn't

know that it would be a further century before the mists of prejudice would finally part.

But in the meantime, despite opposition, ridicule and financial mismanagement, women's football enjoyed a brief, glorious flourishing.

World War I offered thousands of women an undreamed-of independence. By 1918, more than a million women were working in jobs once done by men. It wasn't just the men's jobs that women moved into, but their pastimes as well. The first recorded women's football match of the 20th century seems to have taken place on Christmas Day 1916 in Ulverston, Cumbria, when women from the local munitions factory beat a team from the rest of the town's womenfolk.

That game was the catalyst for a flood of women's fixtures,

which drew large gates and on the whole were favourably (if patronisingly) reported: 'Lady footballers have great attractive qualities,' wrote a journalist from the Essex Newsmen in March 1917. 'Not, of course, for the "classy" character of their play, but in the main for reasons which wild horses would not drag from yours truly.'

From the plethora of women's teams, the 'munitionettes' of the Dick Kerr factory in Preston emerged as a powerful force under the guidance of Alfred Frankland, a manager at the factory. Frankland instigated an aggressive policy of poaching promising players from other teams — including a 14-year-old winger from St Helens, Lily Parr, who subsequently earned the distinction of being the first lady to be sent off for fighting.

But as the war ended and ex-

servicemen returned home, often to unemployment and hardship, the glamour of the women's game began to fade.

In December 1921, the FA passed a resolution stating 'their strong opinion that the game of football is quite unsuitable for females and ought not to be encouraged...the Council requests the clubs belonging to the Association refuse the use of their grounds for such matches'.

It was a death blow for women's football. Dick Kerr's Ladies, rechristened Preston Ladies, played on until 1965, but their time as the David Beckhams of their era was over.

Lily Parr died in 1978, too late to see the renaissance of the sport of which she was such a magnificent pioneer.

But Tim Tate's witty, well-written and deeply sympathetic book is a fitting monument for Lily and all the intrepid women who turned out to play the beautiful game in the teeth of male scorn.



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160
Goals scored in
internationals by
USA's Abby
Warnbach — a
world record