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A Socio-Historical Account of Female Experiences of Football's Golden Age in England

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Introduction

If there is a 'golden age' in the history of football spectating in England (better known in the United States as soccer), it can be argued such a period stretches from the late 1940s to the early 1960s, although recent trends in English football spectatorship suggest that, in a very different socio-cultural climate, the current era offers something of a renaissance for the return of very large crowds to football (Williams 1999). In the 1948–49 season, in the postwar glow of recovery and the search for

Portions of Chap. 8 originally appeared as: Pope, S., & Williams, J. (2011) 'White Shoes to a Football Match!: Female Experiences of Football's Golden Age in England', *Transformative Works and Cultures* 6. Article DOI: 10.3983/twc.2011.0230. URL: http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/230/204

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G. Pfister, S. Pope (eds.), *Female Football Players and Fans*, Football Research in an Enlarged Europe, https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-59025-1_8

collective leisure diversion in a society that boasted full employment but was still experiencing rationing and offered few leisure options, English football generated a record 41.3 million League match admissions (Walvin 2001; Phelps 2005; Taylor 2008, p. 194). The majority of these attendees would have been working-class men supporting their local football clubs—the story was less clear-cut in other European countries—but there was also a sprinkling of middle-class support at English football, as well as early signs of out-of-town support requiring private travel to watch embryonic 'super-clubs' (Mellor 1999).

As social attitudes and patterns of weekend leisure slowly changed in the post-austerity Britain of the 1950s and as the new affluent worker of post-war Britain became more individualistic and more consumerist, communal sport began to lose its grip on the public imagination. Car ownership in Britain rose from 2.3 million vehicles in 1950 to 5.6 million a decade later. Television barely registered in British households in 1950, but by 1961, three-quarters of all homes had a TV set (Taylor 2008, p. 195). By the late 1960s, Football League admissions in England had fallen to 30 million, though these figures were bolstered by crowds at new domestic and European competitions. But from the mid-1960s, the national picture for football in England began to change in other, largely unanticipated, ways.

As crowds continued to fall, English football began to suffer a series of crippling financial crises, and the behaviour of some young male English football fans gradually evolved into a form of highly ritualized intergang violent sporting rivalry, one centred on territorial conflicts and masculinity testing in and around the country's football stadia. These same types of trends were also occurring in other parts of Europe, with crowd disorders being reported in a number of other countries, including West Germany, Greece, and Italy (Dunning et al. 1984). These modern versions of historical football rituals further damaged the national and international public image of the English game (Dunning et al. 1988). English football stadia introduced enforced segregation of fans by physical barriers and 'pens' (Bale 1993) in order to deal with this emerging fan hooliganism in the 1970s and 1980s, but failed to keep pace with prevailing public demand for generally improved (and pacified) leisure provision. English football was also struggling to hold on to its traditional audience in the face of increasing social mobility, class de-alignment and new leisure options, so that it 'could no longer hold the centre of the communal

stage as it once did' (Allison 1981, pp. 134–135). By the 1985–86 season, following a catastrophic hooligan incident involving English club fans in Brussels that resulted in the deaths of 39 supporters,[1] the annual League attendance figure for football had almost halved, to just under 16.5 million: it would prove to be the postwar nadir for English football (Foot 2006, pp. 328–340).

A slow but persistent recovery in the sport's fortunes in England since 1986 was accentuated by the reflexive aftermath of another major stadium disaster, in the city of Sheffield in 1989, in which 96 Liverpool fans were killed (Taylor 1991), and by a new relationship established in 1992 between the top English football clubs and the European satellite television conglomerate BSkyB.[2] As a result, the late-modern version of English football has been radically repositioned in terms of its preferred audience, consumption patterns, market appeal, and global reach, as well as its cultural significance (Williams 2006). New television money has also meant that many major English football stadia have been modernized or rebuilt, with seats replacing standing areas at all major venues. Fan behaviour has also been modified and better regulated by the new, albeit rather suffocating, micro-management regimes established inside English football stadia (Williams 2001). By 2009, annual league football crowds in England had climbed close to the 30 million mark once more, with some evidence that gentrification and a recent surge in *female* attendance at football had contributed disproportionately to this revival in the sport's public fortunes.

Indeed, the first author of this chapter has argued elsewhere (Pope 2017) that there has been a 'feminization' of sports fandom in contemporary society, with increased opportunities for women to become involved in sport as fans and meaning that women now make up a substantial component of the typical sports crowd. She theorizes that this can be attributed to two key factors. Firstly, the recent changes which have occurred in the production of many professional sports, which have arguably created a more welcoming stadium environment for women. In English football, these changes followed the Hillsborough Stadium disaster of 1989 and the subsequent 1990 Taylor Report into the disaster which led to the shift to all-seater stadia, creating a safer and more 'civilized' environment at matches (Williams 2006, p. 98). The rise of the FA Premier League in 1992 and the excessive media coverage of the sport

and its 'celebrity' players may also have opened up elite level English football to some new female (and male) fans. Secondly, wider changes have occurred in women's lives, which have led to greater equality between the sexes, allowing many women to have greater control over their work and leisure lives. These changes have roughly spanned the same period of time as those in professional sport, making it more likely that women will choose to become involved in sport as active fans (see Pope 2017).

However, there is evidence that women have attended football matches in England throughout the sport's history, despite the persistent barriers to their involvement as sports fans (see Lewis 2009; Taylor 1992). Yet many British historians have claimed that English football in the post-World War II period was almost wholly the passion of working-class men (see, e.g., Fishwick 1989; Walvin 1994). Our oral history accounts have revealed a largely hidden history of active female sports fans, women who keenly followed football as fans. Despite evidence of women's history of support as sports fans, very few historical studies of their experiences have been undertaken (see Allon 2012, p. 29). Our chapter directly addresses this lacuna and aims to make more visible the historical experiences of female football fans in Britain. We draw on oral history interviews with 16 older female fans of Leicester City Football Club, a medium-sized provincial club based in the East Midlands of England. Our findings explore women's experiences in relation to the football stadium, styles of female support and relationships with and perceptions of football players. But before addressing them we will next offer an overview of existing sports fan research and discuss the wider context and methodology for our research.

Sports Fan Research

Much of the recent growth in academic research on sports fandom has been characterized by a focus on changing patterns of sports consumption and, especially in the United States, quantitative studies driven mainly by the disciplines of social psychology and sports marketing: a largely statistical approach concerned with unveiling what are claimed to be the primary motivations for fandom (Wann et al. 2001; Chen 2010; Clark et al.

2009; Robinson and Trail 2005; Funk et al. 2004). In the United Kingdom, sports fan research has been rather more theoretically informed, more qualitative, and perhaps a little more sociological. But it has also had a rather narrow base. It has typically focused on how traditional male working-class sporting fans—usually football fans—and the local audience for live sport have been challenged by recent changes in the football nexus, thus producing their recent alleged marginalization or even their exclusion from active sport spectatorship (King 2002; Nash 2000, 2001; Williams and Perkins 1998). This is due; it is claimed, to the connected processes of gentrification, commodification, and the TV-promoted spectacularization (and consequent cultural 'emptying out') that have allegedly characterized new directions in the production and consumption of much late-modern English professional sport, especially professional football (Conn 1997; Giulianotti 1999; Sandvoss 2003).

These are important developments in the new agendas for sports fan research, but in our view there is also a tendency towards nostalgia in some of these accounts, especially concerning British sport's often exclusionary masculinist and cultish past. Moreover, relatively little attention has been focused here on the fan careers and normative experiences, over time, of *female* sports fans, perhaps because it is assumed that so few women challenged the male dominance of football in the 1950s. Indeed, a Mass-Observation survey of British women in 1957 found that 79 per cent of those polled agreed that 'A woman's place is in the home' (Kynaston 2009, p. 573). Or perhaps this lack of research can be attributed to assumptions that some women have been unfairly usurping some men in the late-modern sports stadium (Crolley and Long 2001). Existing studies typically style women sports fans as dysfunctional sexual predators (Crawford and Gosling 2004), subordinate subhooligans (Cere 2003), or spectators negotiating historic forms of male sports opposition to their presence at sports events (Jones 2008). Typically, female fans are stereotyped as lacking detailed knowledge about sport or their club and, consequently, are often considered as inauthentic in their support (Crawford and Gosling 2004; Crolley and Long 2001; Esmonde et al. 2015; Hoeber and Kerwin 2013; see also chapters on female fan experiences in this book). Women often emerge here as incomplete ciphers, as decidedly nouveau consumers of sport, with no identifiable or authentic sporting

histories. In short, they often appear as highly contingent and, at best, highly marginal and ersatz new members of the national sporting community. Our contention is that an excavation of the sporting histories of long-term female football fans in England adds more balance to this typified depiction and also to the research agenda and cultural positioning, more generally, of active female sports spectators.

Context and Methodology

Hill (1996, 3) suggests that the overall aim of Richard Holt's *Sport and the Working Class in Modern Britain* (1990) is to 'investigate popular sport "from below" and thereby gain a perspective on working-class culture and social relationships that could not be acquired by studying dominant national forms of sport'. Thus, in the 1980s, some historians began to rethink their work on British sport, especially in relation to issues of social class. Indeed, Hill (1996) argued that important contributions from learned scholars such as Holt (1986), Jones (1986, 1988), and Taylor (1987) were actually written from a class perspective. However, gender issues remained largely marginalized because many of these same historians presented a 'male version of history' (Hill 1996, p. 12). Oral history accounts of sports fandom in England often excluded or 'invisibilized' women. Football historians have certainly tended to assume that accounts provided by male working-class supporters are the only preferable and available means of illuminating and understanding fan cultures in the postwar period (Holt 1992; Fishwick 1989).

Feminist academics have challenged this masculinist version of sports history. Langhamer (2000), for example, argues that the pre-occupation of historians with certain types of leisure has ignored or misrepresented the experiences of women, and she proposes a more holistic approach to the history of women's leisure. Parratt (2001, pp. 2–3), in her discussion of working-class women's leisure between 1750 and 1914, argues there is a need for an approach to history that 'draws women in from the wings and puts them at center stage, that acknowledges that they were historical agents and deserve to be the subjects of historical research'. In Wimbush and Talbot's *Relative Freedoms* (1988), women's leisure experiences were

also brought more to the fore (see also Deem 1986; Green et al. 1990). But while research of this kind makes women's leisure more visible, it still largely neglects the experiences of female *sports fans*. Hargreaves (1994), for example, recognizes how the importance of sports for women has been largely neglected in research, but her own excellent work still focuses primarily on women's experiences of *playing* sport.

A more recent contribution from Lewis (2009) on female spectators in early English professional football (1880–1914) offers a potentially important new direction and illustrates that women do have a history of sports fandom, even if they usually made up only a small minority of the typical sports crowd. Our own work centralizes the historical experiences of female sports fans in England. In doing so, it seeks to supplement the existing literature on sports history regarding gender and leisure. Historical accounts of active female football fans in postwar England are rare, although Watt's (1993) valedictory popular history of the north London club Arsenal's North Bank standing terrace does examine the memories of some female Arsenal supporters. Not only have the experiences of female sports fans been largely 'written out' of history here, but also the changing demands and the increasing domestic power of women, relatively speaking, have been widely *blamed* for the declining attendance of some men at English football from the postwar spectator high of 1949.

For instance, the historian James Walvin (1994) claims that from the 1950s onwards, British women began to exert more control over how men spent their leisure time and money, thus inexorably drawing respectable married men away from active spectator sport. Fishwick (1989) also argued that English football had always encouraged men, collectively, to spend time *away* from women, and the trend towards more family-based leisure pursuits in Britain in the 1950s coincided with a major decline in English football attendances—aggregate League crowds fell by 11.25 million (around 30 per cent) between 1949 and 1962 (Russell 1997; Walvin 2001). It is perhaps a telling aside that the role of women in English sport in this period is often measured by their alleged negative impact on male attendance rather than by any research-based accounts of the actual experiences of active female sports fans of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s.

These 'golden years' of English football—though years hardly matched by international success—are usually assumed to have ended in the early

1960s, when crowds start to decline quite rapidly. A popular marker here is when, after a bitter struggle between the sport's employers and the footballer players' union, the constraining maximum wage for football players in England was finally lifted in 1961 (Harding 2009). The term 'golden age' often appears in popular and media accounts of the history of the English game, and it is certainly clichéd. For example, both hooliganism and stadium safety were clearly underplayed in this period; English football fans were very poorly served by the responses of the authorities to routine instances of the dangers of overcrowding, and they suffered inadequate and badly resourced fan provision as a result (Ward and Williams 2009; Williams 2010). But this label also seems surprisingly appropriate here, not least because of the obvious warmth with which this period is often recalled by older female football fans.

Most football players in England at this time still earned plausibly ordinary wages compared to the employed mainstream in Britain, and they mixed regularly and relatively easily with local supporters, partially as a result of this fact. In this sense, professional football players of the time in England were clearly and definitively 'class located', in Critcher's (1979) terms. In the late 1940s and for much of the 1950s in Britain, mass car ownership, home-based leisure, the new consumerism, and organized fan hooliganism all lay ahead in English football's uncertain future. The English football professional of the 1950s was a sporting hero known largely to, and embraced by, his local communities for both his character and loyalty; the football player as a truly national or global celebrity, a sports and media star identified mainly by other, more transient, attributes, was generally yet to emerge (Giulianotti 1999).

Our subjects for this research come from a wider, comparative semi-structured interview study of female rugby union and football fans in a single location, the English East Midlands city of Leicester (Pope 2010). Using systematic sampling techniques, our respondents were originally drawn from existing local sampling frames for the two sports, which had been generated by fan surveys undertaken previously in Leicester (Williams 2003; Williams 2004). This produced a total sample size of 85 female sports fans. Respondents were selected to try to reflect the experiences of different generations of female sports spectators from three distinctive age groupings. The football fan sample consisted of ten 'younger

group' fans aged 20–27 (F1–F10), 25 'middle group' fans aged 28–59 (F11–F35), and 16 'older group' fans aged above 60 (F36–F51). But this chapter concentrates on the 16 Leicester City fans who make up the older fan group for football. The original case codes used in the research (F40, F46, etc.) have been utilized to protect participant anonymity; 'STH' below means the fan concerned is currently a Leicester City season ticket holder—someone who attends *all* the club's home matches. At the time of the research, Leicester City was competing in the second tier of English football, but the club routinely attracted more than 20,000 spectators to home games.[3] More recently, in 2016, Leicester City made against-all-odds global headlines by winning the Premier League title, the club's first such title success in 132 years. As a result Leicester was ranked the United Kingdom's 'greatest sporting city' in 2016 (ESPN 2016).

The recorded interviews typically lasted between 45 minutes and 2 hours, although some lasted for up to 4 hours. They were usually conducted in the homes or the workplaces of our respondents. All were conducted by the female researcher and co-author of this chapter (also a Leicester City fan), who was occasionally challenged in her work on this project by male (usually husband) intrusions or other forms of male 'policing' of female research (Deem 1986). This is a further indicator, of course, of the highly marginal role still allocated by some men to some women in the latter's role as sports spectators (Pope 2008). Thus, our findings draw on oral history accounts that explore women's experiences of the so-called golden age of English football in the 1950s and early 1960s. In this chapter we explore three main themes: English football and a sense of safety; styles of female fan support; and women's relationships with football players.

Findings

English Football and a Sense of Well-Being: 'It Was Safe'

Fishwick (1989) describes how Football Association (FA) records show there were only 22 cases of football crowd trouble demanding FA consideration in

the years 1948 and 1949, when Football League attendance peaked in England. It is also remarkable that so many millions of people entered what were clearly unpleasant and even dangerous environments each week—crowded postwar football stadia—and yet the vast majority returned unscathed (Walvin 2001; Williams 2010). Moreover, older female football fans describe their relative *lack* of fear of attending during this period, with some attributing this, on reflection, either to youthful indifference to potential danger—'When you're young, you don't care'—or the idea that any risks involved were acceptable—'All part of the afternoon, the entertainment' (F45, F47). If women (or other fans) ever needed assistance at football matches during this period, they also felt protected by the much-mythologized and eponymous postwar British bobby (police officer):

> It was safe; there was none of this aggression. We didn't have loads of police, just didn't have that, no nastiness, none at all…[But] obviously if you did anything wrong, they'd [the crowd] get the bobby to come and see to you. And everybody was frightened of policemen. Now they're not the least bit [frightened]. (F46, age 73, STH, long-term fan, retired, worked as a nurse)

This is an idealized picture, of course. But the police presence at football matches—or the relative lack of it—only served to reinforce the notion that, in the main, 1950s English football grounds were regarded as safe spaces for both men and women. For example, F43 remembers the 'good times' of attending matches in the years from 1949 with a certain nostalgia when the 'policeman would take off his helmet, so you could see [the match]'. This is perhaps an especially powerful image, strongly signifying the pre-hooligan period of relative crowd harmony—though other accounts clearly suggest that male supporter violence was already a subterranean feature of postwar English football culture (Williams 2010).

A range of positive terms or phrases were used by female fans to describe their early football experiences, implicitly making comparisons with a more fractious, less tolerant, recent past: a 'friendly atmosphere'; 'You never saw any trouble' or heard 'bad language'; one never felt 'scared'; 'intimidated' or 'afraid' (F40, F43, F45, F46, F47, F50, F51). Johnes and Mellor (2006), similarly, argue that a real sense of national cohesion

and togetherness developed around the shared experiences of spectator sport in Britain following the recently experienced privations of World War II. A key moment here perhaps was the live television coverage of the coronation of a new young British queen in 1953 and the first mass TV audience for the so-called Stanley Matthews FA Cup final of the same year. Matthews, the heroic, deferential old England international forward, achieved a life's ambition, to national acclaim, by helping his club Blackpool defeat Lancashire rivals Bolton 4–3 in a coruscating struggle. The early 1950s were also a period of relative national optimism in Britain, when its people assumed the nation would enjoy greater 'social solidarity and attain global significance and glory thanks to the Commonwealth' (Johnes and Mellor 2006, p. 269). In football crowds, this was reflected in rather more prosaic, if significant, terms:

> People were more careful about the way they treated each other. You didn't rush along and knock people over, the atmosphere was sort of friendly… And people were more…well, I certainly didn't see any sign of people being rude or aggressive. (F40, age 64, STH, long-term fan, community social worker)

Hood and Joyce (1999) have tracked similar sentiments among men and women growing up in London working-class neighbourhoods in both the 1930s and 1950s. Their subjects stressed that still-binding structures of family, community, and class solidarity seemed more important and more stable in these periods than they are today. Respondents in our own research seem to share similar ideas about supposed greater communal trust in others, a point perhaps best illustrated when F47 described how large numbers of football supporters were happy to pay local residents threepence to look after their bikes while they watched the match.

This was also a period when relationships between generations in public are remembered—no doubt in part nostalgically—as being experienced rather differently than they are today. A number of respondents, for example, described how they witnessed children being passed down to the front of large football crowds in the early 1950s, over the heads of other crowd members—or how they experienced this themselves as children (F32, F40, F43, F46, F47, F51). There was little apparent fear that

these young people might be abused, crushed, or lost in these potentially chaotic public contexts. There seems to have been relatively little public concern or panic expressed about relations between children and 'stranger' adults in sports crowds. As F43 recalls:

> I thought it was very exciting, I mean they were big crowds in those days. I've been down at one time at half past seven in the morning to get on the wall for a cup match […]. We were there early, but if I wasn't you were passed down. If you wanted to go [to the] toilet you were passed up, [be]cause they [the toilets] were at the back *(laughs)*. You made friends and they'd save you a place on the wall, you know? They'd spread out. (F43, age 69, STH, long-term fan, retired, worked as a school meals cook)

English football culture at this time was also less prescriptive and certainly less profit-focused. Watching football was described as a form of cheap entertainment that would often be combined with dancing in the evening (F45) to complete a Saturday of simple, local leisure pleasures. Football grounds seem to be viewed, broadly speaking, as friendly and safe spaces in this period by female supporters—places characterized by the easy mixing of rival supporters in the stadium. Some respondents suggested that mixing with rival supporters—more difficult today inside micro-managed, segregated stadia—was also an important part of the essential sociability of the event (F48, F49, F51):

> The atmosphere could be absolutely electric. And both sets of fans were together. I mean, that was part of it: conversing with *them*. You'd say things like "He's a good player." Or "What's so and so like, I've not seen him play yet?" to *other* fans. [emphasis added] (F49, age 70, STH, long-term fan, retired, worked as a secretary)

As well as the term 'electric' used here, descriptions such as 'buoyed up', 'elated', 'enjoyable', and 'excited' were generally used to describe the tightly packed postwar crowds that, like great creatures, were often remembered as surging forward in collective swaying (F45, F47, F49, F51). This sociability and easy familiarity inside football crowds operated across the sexes. One of Watt's (1993, p. 275) male interviewees described, for example, how male fans at Arsenal used to warm their hands under

the arms of unfamiliar females, with no objections. The sense that there was rather more sexual innocence and more mutual trust between the sexes at postwar football was also touched upon by our own respondents. Those older women who were terrace (standing) fans claim not to have been threatened at all by being stationed for hours on end, 'body to body' (F50); instead, such corporeal proximity with men helped women keep warm (F47, F50).

Social class relations also shaped the football stadium crowd. F50 recalled how, in this period, stadium seating was assumed to be for 'the hierarchy'; only a relatively small part of the stadium capacity was made up of seats, and this was where members of the higher social classes, club directors, and shareholders sat—the 'posh people' (F47), in other words. Thus, perhaps a more strongly shared stadium *class* identity added to this greater community spirit and a greater sense of common purpose and solidarity at the stadium, and indeed, to stronger feelings of collective solidarity in British society more generally.

This generally friendly match day climate at postwar English football would be challenged, of course, by developments among young male supporters in later decades. Walvin (2001, p. 156), for example, notes that by the end of the 1960s, fan behaviour at football in England was being discussed as a rising social problem, and more serious incidents soon pitched rival groups of male hooligans against each other. Women's experiences at football stadia in the 1970s and 1980s were certainly different from those in the earlier golden age. F40, for example, described how her dad first took her to watch Reading Football Club when she was 13 years old, and she continued to attend matches throughout the 1950s and 1960s, before moving to Leicester in the 1970s. Here, experience of male fan violence meant she would soon resort to watching sport on television:

> Going home after the match there would be really running street battles almost with crowds like surging forward, and things being thrown […]. I was frightened of a bottle on the back of the head really you know, stuff was being lobbed about the streets, it was really quite awful […]. I never saw any of that when I was a child certainly…you just mixed in you know? It didn't matter who […]. I thought well why am I putting myself through

> this? Being frightened to go somewhere…And I just stopped going. (F40, age 64, STH, long-term fan, community social worker)

Other respondents who continued to attend during this period also recalled instances when they were fearful for their own safety at matches. This fan violence would indeed represent the end, for some of the game's supporters, of the modernist optimism and collective solidarities experienced at sport in the 'golden age'.

Styles of Support: 'Everybody Was in Tune'

Exactly *how* did women support their sports clubs during this period? Some sense of the carnivalesque and rejection of the banality and anonymity of everyday life are clearly apparent. Turbin (2003, p. 45) argues that dress is highly gendered and that clothing gives both shape and meaning to the bodies of men and women. Dress is inherently both public and private, as 'an individual's outwardly presented signs of internal or private meanings are significant only when they are also social, that is comprehensible on some level to observers'. Some of our respondents discussed with relish their own match day football costumes, outfits they had made or purchased especially for this purpose. These seemed to be important for individual (private) identities and for exhibiting a public face for their fandom. For example, F47 described her public parading of Leicester City's blue and white colours for the 1949 FA Cup final while travelling with a female friend:

> We were teenagers and we dressed alike…And we had this whitish coat with a belt round. We had royal blue trousers […] and we had head scarves, I had them made on the market […]. We thought it was very smart…and, you know, the thing of the moment. We were—we're *somebody*; we're on the bus and we're going to Wembley. (F47, age 78, STH, long-term fan, retired, worked in sewing)

FA Cup Finals—the culmination of the English football season and the end point of the most historically important domestic knockout football tournament in the world—were very special community occasions in

this era, a welcome opportunity for the demonstration of local female craft and for ostentatious public displays in a generally grey public arena. The sporting nation gathered around TV sets for the annual ritual of live TV football. The FA Cup seemed to demand more expressive forms of local support for the contenders, and we can perhaps speculate that this opportunity for public ostentation may have been even more important to *female* fans. This was an era before the mass production of football replica kits and goods, so outfits were often original—individualized and designed by fans. F49 described how she prepared her costume for weeks prior to the final, and that she would even wear her outfit to work to seek the approval and opinions of her colleagues. Dressing up for football may also have been a way of seeking male fan approval, a publicly legitimated way for females to express both their (hetero)sexuality *and* their support for club and civic loyalty. F47 remembers receiving compliments for her FA Cup final costume from the male fan group she stood alongside at matches. F38, and three other young women from Leicester, wore their outfits to *all* home and away matches, including the 1963 FA Cup final:

> F38: We'd be the only girls on the train. Oh, it used to be fabulous *(laughs)*. We used to have white skirts, royal blue tops, white shoes…I mean, white shoes to a football match! But that's how it was *(laughs)*. [And] blue and white scarves…we all wore the same hair; hair all up here. We must have looked a sight!'
>
> *'Researcher: Did you get much attention from men then?'*
>
> 'F38: Oh *yes, yes*! Wonderful! *(laughs)*.
>
> (F38, age 60, STH, long-term fan, retired, worked as a clerical worker)

Some older female fans also showed examples of their fan memorabilia from earlier decades during interviews. For example, one respondent had a football headscarf that she had made at the local hosiery market in Leicester, with players from Leicester City and Wolverhampton Wanderers hand painted on it, this for the 1949 FA Cup Final. Many female fans had football photographs on the walls of their homes, including shots taken with players from previous decades. Some had also decorated parts of their homes in Leicester City blue. One respondent had a cabinet in her home containing football products she had collected over the years,

including a number of model foxes (Leicester City's club logo and nickname). This highlights the importance of fan memorabilia for our older sample of female fans.

After Bolton Wanderers lost the 1953 'Matthews' FA Cup final, the mayor of Bolton praised the club's players for promoting and adding lustre to the town (Johnes and Mellor 2006, p. 267). A local football club reaching the FA Cup final at this time contributed to a palpable sense of civic pride and a strengthening of local communal identities for both men and women of the city. It generated a sense of community affiliation that affected female supporters as much as it did men—though relatively few fans, male or female, had the opportunity to *attend* the final because of restrictive FA ticketing policies. F38 described how 'tickets were few and far between' for FA Cup finals at this time, but also noted that such matches engaged not only active football fans, but the city as a whole:

> You could go in the shops; they'd got flags up, even in the little villages, "Good luck City." It was the community, this is what I mean. It makes the whole city, because you'd walk round Leicester all trimmed up blue and white. Oh it was a wonderful sight to see […]. It was great; it was good for the city, good for the city of Leicester, because everybody was in tune. (F49, age 70, STH, long-term fan, retired, worked as a secretary)

The image of the English football stadium of the 1940s and 1950s as a poorly appointed but safe—if highly masculinized—public space was expressed very strongly by those who confirmed that women were a distinct minority at matches in these early postwar years (F36, F37, F38, F40, F47, F51). But some female attendees also found the sheer numbers and obtrusive habits of men intimidating. For instance, F36 went to one football match as a child but then was deterred from attending by the large numbers of men present who were smoking; she did not return to the stadium until the late 1990s. This oppressive, smoky atmosphere was mentioned by other older female fans (F37, F47). Of the 11 older fans who regularly attended matches during these years, a number attended games at some stage (usually as teenagers) in all-female groups (F38, F43, F47, F49).

But gender also presented some special privileges in the stadium—including improved access to star players, and being chaperoned and generally protected by chauvinistic men. For example, F40 described how,

because hardly any of her female friends went to football, she enjoyed some local distinction. She could boast to female friends, 'Oh, I saw him. Oh and he's so handsome, this man. This *footballer*.' Others discussed how, as teenagers attending matches in 1940s and 1950s, they had player favourites (F40, F43, F45, F46, F47, F49, F50) and some stayed behind with other female fans after games to collect player autographs. Players, it seems—even these modernist and modest class-located, postwar sporting heroes—had something of a sexual aura surrounding them, although the typical socio-economic and cultural profile and the lifestyle of the English professional football player has changed dramatically since.

Women's Relationships with Football Players: 'They Were Just Like One of Us'

First team top level football players in England were lauded in the 1940s and 1950s, but they were also strongly located in the local community (Critcher 1979). They could be met by fans at the local food market, in shops, or at one's place of work; some women fans had relatives who were friends with players (F45, F50, F51). There was a strong sense that players were 'Leicester people', participants in a communal production who would typically walk to the home ground along with everyone else on a match day (F49). Terms such as 'approachable', 'closer', 'one of us', and 'ordinary guys' who lived in 'ordinary houses' (F37, F40, F43, F46, F47) were frequently used when discussing players of this period.

A number of older respondents either lived near Leicester City players or knew people who did; players were a part of the local working-class or lower-middle-class communities of the city (F25, F39, F40, F43, F46). Some recalled seeing players socially after important matches. F39 remembered how her pub-owning parents provide lodgings to a Sunderland player who was on loan at City in the 1950s; lodging a football player was no great social marker at the time. F43 even described how, later, the Leicester City and 1966 England World Cup-winning goalkeeper Gordon Banks had living and child care arrangements in Leicester, which meant that he maintained strong daily connections with ordinary women's lives, including mixing regularly with local mothers:

> I used to take her [daughter] to school, and I used to walk with Gordon Banks when he took his chap to school. […] He was just in an ordinary semi-detached house up the road near the school, and mixed with all the mothers. [Be]cause there weren't that many men that took the children to school. He was a very nice chap. (F43, age 69, STH, long-term fan, retired, worked as school meals cook)

Thus, women fans in the city may have been in awe of footballers to a degree, but because players mixed locally and were not earning wages that were notably superior to many other local people in professional jobs, they were socially and culturally located; they did not 'think they were up on a pedestal like some [players] do now' (F37). Football players today were seen as being more 'cut off' because they live separately from fans, in 'big mansions' (F40, F43). Holt and Mason (2000, p. 122), commenting on football culture in the 1950s, similarly suggest that 'This was a world where local heroes were still ordinary men. Great players were often seen on the street or in the pub.' Some players in England had part-time jobs in addition to playing football professionally; and despite attendances increasing after World War II, the existence of a maximum wage in England meant that most players did not benefit from this rise in club income (Walvin 2001). Players may have seen themselves as 'football slaves' in this period (Russell 1997, p. 92), but their modest earnings offered a greater 'moral sense' to their established position as engaged and located figures in the local community (F19, F29, F30, F36, F37, F40, F45, F46, F49, F51).

Older female respondents fondly remember this era, partly because of the imagined greater sense of continuity and stability, but also because—perhaps less likely today—football was perceived to be an important and democratic site for the expression of local belonging as well as national virtues. These were often defined, in part, by a sense of certainty about local traditions and place and cultural continuity: a social homogeneity and a common ethnicity. In today's more global game, Leicester City, like most English football clubs, now recruits players from around the world. This new direction for football was rather more difficult for some respondents to identify with and accept:

> I'm a big believer in local talent […]. I mean in Leicester City now—don't get me wrong, I'm not racist—but you've got nine "internationals", I'll call them, in that team and probably two or three white players. None of them are from Leicester, probably. Are they going to be loyal to Leicester City as a club? […]. Their loyalty is probably with their salary. They think "I'll play for Leicester but I don't live here, I've got no interest in the city, I don't care." (F36, age 68, occasional attendee, new fan, retired, worked as a secretary)

In this sense, local (meaning white British) players of the past were generally deemed to have been more dedicated to their local clubs, and hence fans got 'better value for money' from them, compared to the more transient and wage-focused international football professionals of today (F19, F36, F40, F45, F46, F49). Today's superstars are deemed to be detached and are 'not really hungry enough for the game' (F40). Because their loyalty is market-driven—strictly to the best payer—they do not show the same levels of attachment, commitment, and physical effort—a willingness to 'die for the shirt'—as players of the golden age once did:

> It was football [then], it isn't today…It was better then, because they were working hard and they weren't just thinking about the money […]. They were all good players in those days, as I say. They'd got to play good otherwise they wouldn't get the money. But now they get the money anyway, it doesn't matter whether they earn it or not. (F45, age 80, STH, long-term fan, retired, worked as a personal assistant)

> It seems like a long time ago now; the changes are fairly subtle all the way through. But it's gone, from ordinary working class lads who kicked a ball about, who lived in the community, to players that are no longer part of our community, but belong to their own. (F40, age 64, STH, long-term fan, community social worker)

Conclusion

The recollections and views expressed above are, partly couched in nostalgic reflection, and sometimes dimmed by memory. Social and economic change—the impact of globalization—is difficult to accept, perhaps especially as one gets older and, arguably, more conservative. Were all football players in England of the 1950s really 'class located' and as committed to their clubs and local supporters as is suggested here? Do all foreign players today lack the commitment that is somehow deemed as being more inherent in locals? This seems doubtful. But these comments, we assert, reveal wider discomforts and anxieties about the neoliberal sports and economic order of today—about the perceived 'chaos of reward' of Jock Young's (1999) disorienting late-modern world. Here, the widely held perception seems to be that society today is less obviously fair and meritocratic, and that showing loyalty and working hard—in any sport, business, or company—is no longer a guarantee of just rewards and opportunities as perhaps it once was. Players of this 'golden era' of English football are thus idealized for their supposed love of the game and for their more visceral connections with people, and an occupation, that was 'their hobby, as well as their sport and their profession' (F49).

The probably mistaken idea expressed by some respondents that 'there were no super heroes years ago; they all played as a team' (F43) also echoes Phelps' (2001, p. 47) suggestion that the ethos of the 'starless' southern Portsmouth championship winning teams in England of seasons 1948–49 and 1949–50 embodied the same sense of player commitment and industriousness that was so widely admired then in the working-class cities of the English North and Midlands. Richard Holt (1992) has suggested that English football is rooted in working-class traditions of collective endeavour. Playing football provided British male factory workers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with a sense of release, belonging, and solidarity. The capacity to work hard, take punishment, and play your role in the team—all features of manual work—were the qualities that working-class male sports crowd most admired.

Thus, the male working classes in England identified strongly with football because it seemed to reflect a working-class experience back to

them. The division of labour within a team could be compared to the 'specialization of skills that went into the production of iron and steel or, perhaps more appropriately, the manufacturing of machinery' (Holt 1992, pp. 162–63). Our own interviewees—like those consulted by Phelps (2001)—also confirm that the key qualities admired in players of this period included a sense of fair play and a 'gentlemen's' reputation for being reserved; for showing courage, and exhibiting heroic forms of traditional working-class loyalty and toughness. Thus, it seems that female fans also identified strongly with traits more typically associated historically with a specific type of mythologized English identity and *masculinity*. While some of our female fans recalled identifying strongly with individual players, there was little room in supporters' affections—male or female—for 'fancy Dans' or faint hearts. In many ways, such sentiments endure in England today.

In more recent times, it can be contested that women have a more respected role as fans in the game. Pope (2017) argues that there has been a recent 'feminization' of sports fandom, with women now broadly accepted as forming an essential (and often substantial) component of the sports crowd. This process is argued to have first begun in the 1990s and, in men's professional football in England, this was in part the result of changes that were implemented after the Hillsborough Stadium disaster of 1989. For example, safer stadium spaces, improved facilities, and the move to all-seater stadia have arguably created a more attractive environment for women at matches. These changes have also coincided with greater media and social media coverage of the sport and its 'celebrity' players which may also have opened up the sport to some new female fans. Pope (2017) theorizes that these changes in professional sport have also occurred alongside major transformations in women's lives; arguably from the 1990s there has been a major structural shift which has reoriented the balance of power between the sexes which has enhanced women's autonomy and opportunities to engage in leisure activities, including becoming sports fans. This notion of relative 'feminization' is supported by statistics which show that whilst women are still in the minority as active fans at top level men's professional football, today they make up a relatively high proportion of fans; for example, 26 per cent of all Premier League stadium fans are reportedly female (Premier League 2016).

In recent years, there has been a growing body of literature on female fans worldwide, but when compared to the large body of literature on male sports fans it is clear that sports fandom continues to be researched as a largely male domain. Most studies on female fans have also focused upon women's experiences in contemporary society, so there is a lack of historical work on women's experiences as fans (Allon 2012). This chapter has focused upon women's experiences in football's 'golden age' in England, thus helping to redress this dearth of historical work on women's fandom, but clearly there is a need for further socio-historical work to examine women's experiences as sports fans.

Our findings here offer but a brief historical snapshot of women's experiences of English football's golden age. We have concentrated on their perceptions of football crowds, on styles of female support, on local identities framed through sport, and on their relations with, and perceptions of, British football players from the late 1940s to the early 1960s. We contend that women fans have been largely ignored by male sociologists and historians in their accounts of the cultural and social significance and meaning of football historically. The oral history research presented here can make some claim to be trying to 'retrieve' the experiences of women fans in this context and to explore, in greater depth, the various ways in which women once connected with the sport, in both its production and consumption. This was before wider social changes from the late 1960s onwards—including the rise of male fan hooliganism—began to offer new challenges to the role of women as active fans at English football matches.

Acknowledgements This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council (grant PTA-030-2005-00310).

Notes

1. In 1985, at the European Cup final between Liverpool and Juventus at the Heysel Stadium, Brussels, Liverpool supporters broke into a section of the stadium containing Italian fans; in the ensuing panic, 39 supporters died following a wall collapse. In addition to the action of English fans, the

European football governing body UEFA and also the Belgian authorities were widely criticized for the poor state of the stadium and the inadequate control exercised at the venue. As a result of these incidents, English football clubs were banned from playing abroad, an exclusion that lasted five years, with an additional year for Liverpool FC (Williams 2010).

2. The Hillsborough Stadium disaster occurred on April 15, 1989, during an FA Cup semi-final between Liverpool and Nottingham Forest at Sheffield's football ground, Hillsborough. Holt and Mason (2000, 159) discuss how the match was abandoned shortly after the start, when overcrowding on the terraces led to Liverpool supporters being crushed against perimeter fencing. A total of 96 people died and many more were injured. The tragedy was primarily the result of police mismanagement of the crowd; it led to the British government commissioning Lord Justice Taylor to investigate the causes of the accident. The Taylor Report of 1990 made 76 recommendations—most of which were implemented—including the removal of all perimeter fencing; the elimination of standing accommodation by August 1994 from the grounds of all clubs in the top two divisions in England and Wales and the top division in Scotland; and the establishment of a football licensing authority with statutory powers, which would inspect grounds and give out safety licences (Williams 2010, Chap. 17).
3. Leicester City FC currently (2016/17) competes in the Premier League, the highest level of English football. The club was competing in the Championship, the second tier of English football, while the research was being undertaken. For many of the years following World War II and into the 1950s, the club competed at the second level of English football (Division Two), but between 1957 and 1969, Leicester City enjoyed its longest-ever unbroken period in top flight football (Division One). Thus, in the period our respondents are discussing, the club was fairly successful, and made four losing FA Cup Final appearances, in 1949, 1961, 1963, and 1969. During this 'golden age' Leicester City played matches at the former stadium Filbert Street, the club's home ground from 1891 until 2002. After relegation in 2004, the club aspired to return to top flight English football and this ambition was achieved in 2014. After narrowly escaping relegation in 2014/15, the club won the Premier League title in 2015/16 and made global headlines across the world.

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