

FIGHTING FOR EQUALITY IN AND THROUGH FOOTBALL: 1970-1988

Other than a short-lived attempt to create an [International Ladies Football Association](#) and the hosting of a European Championship in 1957, women's football remained mostly dormant into the 1960s. But as the Civil Rights movement began to take hold, sport became both a target and a tool for race and gender equality activists. Seeking more than "opportunities" to play, female athletes including American tennis star, Billie Jean King, fought for equality within and beyond sport. In this time of change and protest, the relative success of informal Women's World Cups organized by the Federation of Independent European Female Football ([FIEFF](#) in [1970 \(Italy\)](#) and [1971 \(Mexico\)](#)), as well as the creation of the [Women's Football Association in England](#), caught the attention of FIFA and UEFA. Although the Italian-based FIEFF ceased operations in 1972, sensing a shift in attitudes towards women's football and its potential for growth UEFA called on its members to take control. In 1971 the [English FA lifted its affiliated-pitch ban](#), effectively taking back control of the women's game. However, it would years before attitudes in England and much of Europe regarding women's football would shift.

In the United States, however, "soccer" (derived from *Association* Football to distinguish from American, gridiron football) would explode in popularity due to the US Department of Education's game-changing [Title IX legislation](#). Enacted in [1972 against a backdrop of shifting ideas about "rights"](#), Title IX required all schools and agencies that received federal funding to ensure equal opportunities and support for both males and female. Although not a sport-specific piece of legislation, the direct and indirect impacts of Title IX on women's sport (including soccer) was nothing short of monumental. With [intercollegiate](#) and [interscholastic sport](#) a significant aspect of American life, school and colleges scrambled to generate mass athletic opportunities for women to avoid the need to cut boys and men's programs - particularly due to the large size of gridiron football teams. Soccer, not popular amongst American males at the time, became an ideal activity to support a significant number of females in a single school sport. Soccer programs popped up across the United States, with a commitment to infrastructure, scholarships, and high-performance support promised to meet Title IX requirements - providing a [sudden boost to grow the women's game](#). Soon, female superstars including [Mia Hamm at the University of North Carolina](#) became known quantities. American soccer [used this head start](#), and the apathy of most other nations, to become a dominant power in international football - unlike the men's program due to the nation's long-standing aversion to the world's (not American) game.

Concurrent with the implementation of Title IX, the Cold War was transforming the significance of women's international sport more broadly. [East Germany](#), in particular, embarked on a strategic plan to raise the performance levels of its women's athletes on the global stage - particularly at the Olympics. The East Germans, rightly, calculated that women's

medals counted the same as men's in the Olympic medal table (unfortunately, part of the communist nation's targeting of female sporting success included mass doses of [then-undetectable performance enhancing drugs](#)). With Olympic competition serving as an [ideological battleground](#), western sporting nations responded to the communist challenge with an increased focus on international women's athlete development.

But while women's sport was undergoing a massive transformation, traditional ideals about the feminine sportswoman continued to hold sway. [Nadia Comaneci and her 10/10](#) scores at the 1976 Olympics in Montreal, for example, represented more than sporting perfection – she also reflected the idea of the perfect female athlete. Despite the gains made through the 1960s and 1970s for gender equality, women in sport were still viewed as delicate (or conversely, masculine), sexualized, and in need of male control. Resultantly, an [era of hooliganism](#) and toxic masculinity [on and off the pitch](#) led to the slow growth of women's football in traditional power nations such as England.