

## 1990s WOMENS FOOTBALL: EMERGENCE, POWER, INFLUENCE

In the immediate aftermath of the end of the Cold War, a complex of factors rapidly transformed football – including hyper-masculine attitudes that impacted the women’s game.

First, with the fall of Communism, a new era of “globalization” emerged. Professional athletes in sports such as [ice hockey](#), [basketball](#), and football, became more “vocationally” mobile. Foreign players slowly left domestic leagues for more lucrative professional opportunities – further enhanced by the 1995 European Court of Justice ruling in favour of [Jean-Marc Bosman’s challenge](#) to club control of players. The Bosman Ruling [gave footballers the right to change clubs](#) at the end of their contracts. Collectively, the newfound political and legal freedom “globalized” football – including the English game.

Around the same time, in 1989, a [poorly managed](#) crush of fans at an FA Cup match at Hillsborough Stadium in Sheffield, England led to the [deaths of 97 Liverpool supporters](#). A government-sponsored review of the tragedy, the [Taylor Report](#), recommended significant changes to English football grounds including expensive renovations to deteriorating stadiums in order to provide [a seat for every spectator](#). Combined with England’s poor international performances, a rising culture of hooliganism, and declining revenues throughout the 1980s, the top clubs [proposed a breakaway 1<sup>st</sup> division tier](#). The Premier League eventually negotiated a compromise to remain within the Football League pyramid and affiliated with the FA, but the new venture turned English football into a financial behemoth with its inception in 1992.

According to David Conn in [The Beautiful Game?](#), this complex combination of labour reform, globalization, the Hillsborough tragedy, and a desire to rid the English game of its darker elements, led to changes in spectator demographics. [Middle- and upper-class attendees](#) now flooded the renovated stadiums, and the emergent Premier League’s commercial ambitions led to a rapid rise in ticket prices and subscription-based television access. With its newfound economic heft, as well as a more “cosmopolitan” consumer base, the Premier League began importing now-available players and coaches from around the world. This, in turn, transformed the playing style in England’s top tier, with a range of skill and tactical nous from Europe and South America replacing brute force 4-4-2 styles typically preferred by the “hard men” of football long in control of the English game.

Hyper-masculine attitudes towards football therefore changed. Officials began punishing violent play more stringently, crowds became less aggressive, and appreciation for more “artful” football grew. Combined with the strides made in sporting equality across the 1970s and 1980s, football was primed for a gender revolution. The first step, from an international perspective, came in 1988 with [FIFA hosting a “test event”](#) in China to gauge interest in a Women’s World Cup. This proposal followed 4 successful non-FIFA sanctioned global women’s tournaments called

[the Mundialito](#) held in Japan (1981) and Italy (1984, 1985, 1986). The [FIFA Women's Invitation Tournament](#) included 12 nations - host China, Japan, and Thailand from the AFC; Ivory Coast from CAF; Brazil from CONMEBOL; Australia from OFC (before switching to the AFC); Czechoslovakia, Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden from UEFA; and Canada and the United States from CONCACAF. 45,000 people attended the opening match, with Norway going on to defeat Scandinavian rival Sweden in the final.

Considered a success, FIFA formally announced that the [first Women's World Cup](#) would be held, also in [China, in 1991](#). A twelve-team tournament ended with the United States defeating European champion Norway in a 2-week event held in November. Averaging nearly 20,000 spectators per 80-minute match, the World Cup exceeded expectations. The second edition of the [Women's World Cup, in 1995](#), went to Sweden after Bulgaria dropped out as hosts. Again, twelve teams took part, with [Norway capturing the title](#). Only 112,000 tickets were sold for the 1995 World Cup - resulting in significantly lower attendance than China.

The Women's World Cup's evolution rapidly accelerated in [1999 as the event moved to the United States](#) - where girls/women's soccer continued to thrive in the [decades following Title IX](#). As hosts of the 1996 Olympics (in Atlanta) and the [inaugural women's soccer competition at the Games](#), US Soccer officials saw firsthand the growing interest (and American dominance) in elite women's football. To capitalize, and to take advantage of the enlarged 16 team tournament field, matches were scheduled across the USA in massive gridiron football stadiums. During the tournament, over 1.2 million spectators attended, and all 32 games were broadcast across the United States on mainstream television. Eurosport televised the event to 55 other nations, [generating newfound global interest](#). [The final](#), featuring the United States against China, drew record attendance numbers (over 90,000) with international celebrities and high-ranking political figures - including President Bill Clinton - amongst the crowd. 40 million viewers tuned in to watch the USA and China reprise the '96 Olympic gold medal matchup. Further pleasing FIFA, the 1999 World Cup is estimated to have generated a \$4M USD profit.

Socially and culturally, the 1999 final between the USA and China at the Rose Bowl in Los Angeles, was a watershed moment for women's football - and women's sport more broadly. Scoreless after 90 minutes and extra time, the final moved into a penalty shootout. Tied 4-4, but with last shot advantage, the USA's Brandi Chastain scored to give the Americans the title. [Celebrating her goal](#) in front of the massive live crowd and global television viewership, [Chastain ripped off her jersey](#) and fell to her knees. The image of the unabashed, [sports bra clad Chastain](#) emerged in pure joy on the pitch became the featured photo for media outlets around the world - including the [cover of Sports Illustrated](#). For many, the iconic moment represented a newfound power for women displayed through athletic prowess and social defiance.