



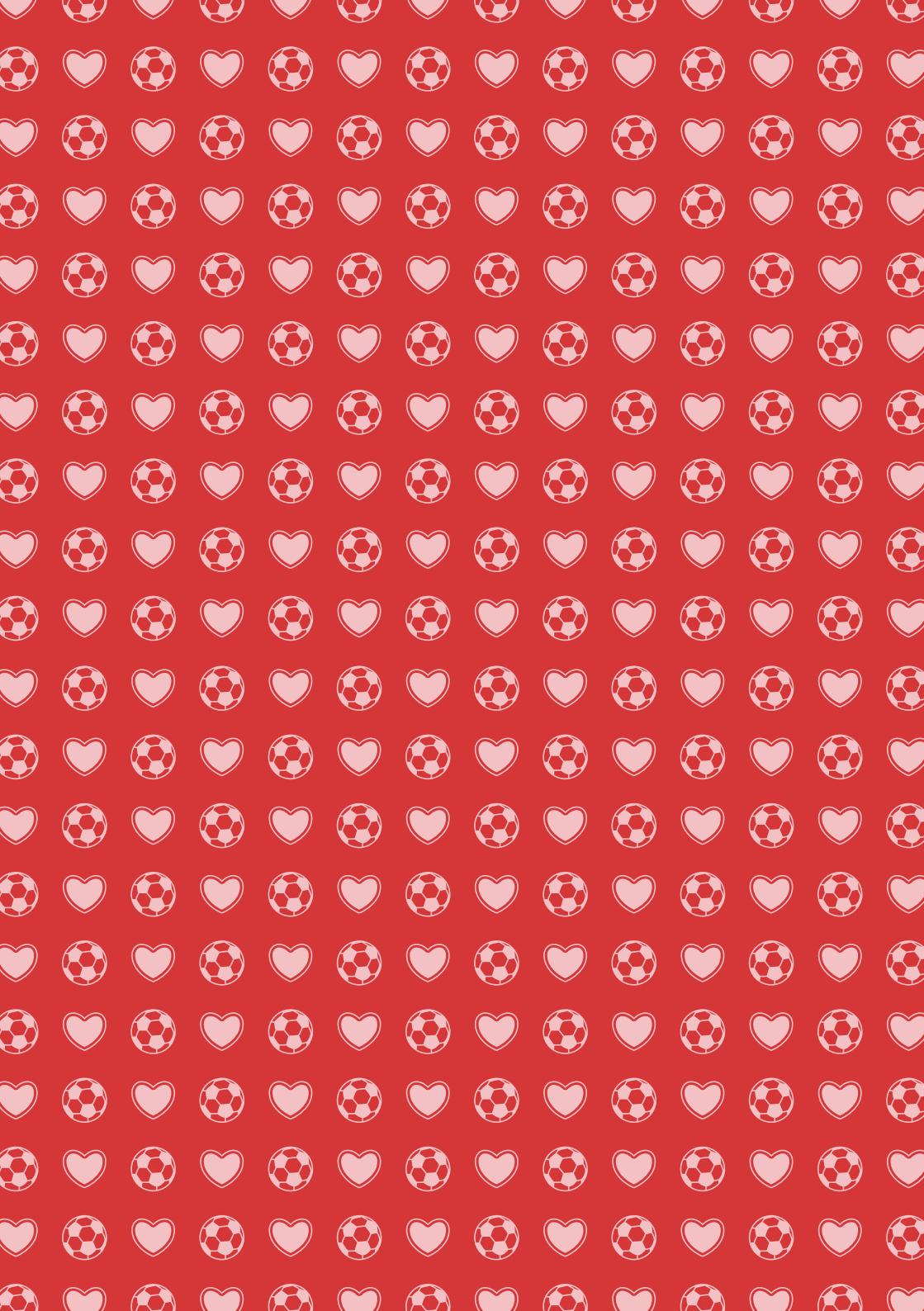
THE PLAYBOOK

MASTERING THE GAME

by Narinder Dhani



girls4football



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NARINDER DHAMI

Narinder was born in Wolverhampton, West Midlands and grew up with two cultures at home because her dad is Indian and her mum is English. She always loved reading books and writing stories from when she was very young. Narinder was a big football fan growing up (she still is), and she used to go to matches with her dad at Molineux to watch Wolverhampton Wanderers.

After leaving Birmingham University (where Narinder obtained an English degree and also met her husband), she started teaching in a comprehensive school in Essex, before moving to a primary school in the east end of London. She enjoyed teaching, but over the years she started writing stories again with a view to getting published. She entered a magazine competition to write the first three chapters of a novel, and was placed second – her prize was a word processor, an Amstrad 9152! So Narinder decided it was time she left her teaching job and started writing full-time.

The first book Narinder ever wrote was a short novel for younger children called *A Medal for Malina*. The book was accepted by the first publisher she sent it to, and she's never looked back since. She's published more than 300 books, including '13 Hours', 'Bang, Bang, You're Dead', and the 'Bindi Babes' series. Narinder has also written around eighty of the multi-million-selling 'Rainbow Magic' books for younger children, under the shared pseudonym of Daisy Meadows, as well as many fiction and non-fiction texts for educational publishers.

Football has always been a big part of Narinder's work - she novelized the smash-hit film 'Bend it Like Beckham' in 2002, and she also wrote a series about girls' football, published in 2009, called 'The Beautiful Game'. She's also written many short stories and books for younger children that have a football theme.



FOREWORD BY NARINDER DHAMI

An estimated twenty-nine million girls play football all around the world. It sounds like a staggering figure, right? And yet there were only 3.9 million registered female players in 2023, although admittedly this figure has tripled over the previous ten years. Only 9% of referees are female. Only 5% of coaches are female. And it's concerning that around 50% of girls disengage from sport during puberty for various reasons that include: feeling judged by others, lack of confidence, the pressure of schoolwork and not feeling safe outside.

If you identify with any of this, you'll be as thrilled as I was to learn that Mastercard has launched a new programme called Girls4Football. This Europe-wide programme aims to unlock the potential that exists in every girl through the power of football, inspiring them to be passionate about the game whilst also giving them the life skills to be successful in all areas of their lives. Playing football can help with building confidence and resilience, and it can also help to improve leadership and communication skills, all things that can be very useful for a career in football, sport in general or pretty much any other industry.

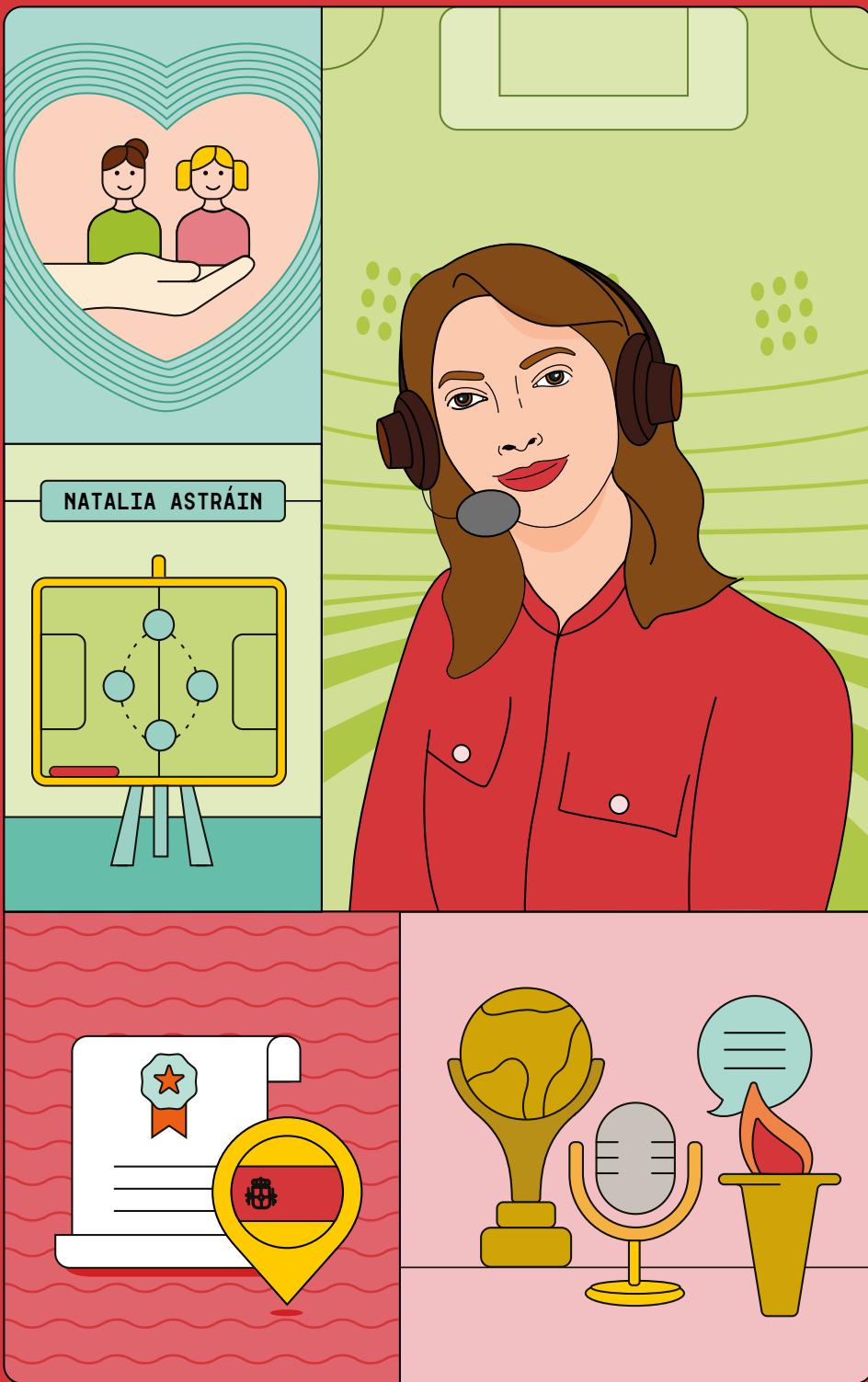
The Playbook: Mastering The Game is the story of eleven inspirational women. Women who are trailblazers in the world of female football. Not all of them are players, as you might expect. Some are coaches. Some are referees. Some work for football clubs on the business and administration side. Hopefully you'll quickly realise that having a career in football or in any sport doesn't necessarily involve playing!

There are many different career pathways to choose from.

The one thing all our trailblazers have in common, though, is a passion for the beautiful game. This passion, and their determination to achieve their ambitions, has kept them going in what is still a challenging world, driving them on to succeed despite encountering setbacks like sexism, injury and lack of funds, amongst other obstacles. Someone always had to be the 'first' woman to achieve different levels in the football world, and a huge number of 'firsts' were achieved by the women in this book. It was an absolute pleasure for me to interview them – all of them were unfailingly generous with their time and knowledge, and very keen to encourage girls to follow in their footsteps. You can't fail to be inspired when you read about their achievements.

I grew up in the 1970s and remember playing football with my friends in the street outside our house, just as many of these women did. Imagine a girl who loves football having to grow up in a world with no girls' football clubs, no female TV commentators, no female football experts on TV, no female footballer role models. That was my lived experience, along with so many of our trailblazers. Mastercard's Girls4Football programme aims to continue to redress this imbalance and to give young girls and women the status in football that they deserve. And I, for one, am incredibly excited to be a small part of this.

We hope you enjoy reading the stories of the eleven inspirational women featured within this book and learn something from each of their different journeys to success in a variety of roles in the game. Whether you are a young girl dreaming of a career in sport, or someone like me who loves hearing from women that have broken down barriers to pave the way for those that follow, there is something that everyone can take away from this book.



NATALIA ASTRÁIN

'If you asked my mum about my first football memory,' says Natalia Astráin, 'she will tell you that I was born with a football under my arm!'

Natalia has had an extremely interesting and varied career in the football world. Not only was she a player herself, she was the first woman in Spain to obtain the UEFA Pro Licence in coaching. What a great achievement! She's a total pleasure to chat to – very warm, friendly and approachable, passionate about football and generous about sharing her advice and experience.

She was born in Pamplona, Spain, in 1976. Her family were big football fans, and Natalia grew up supporting her local team, Osasuna, but she says, 'we support a big team too!' In Natalia's case, that's Barcelona. Osasuna were in La Liga, and Natalia remembers her first time of going with her dad to the stadium to watch them play. It's a wonderful memory for her.

Natalia started off by playing football with her friends and with her dad because, as we've seen, there were hardly any girls' clubs when our trailblazers were growing up. 'I tried to join a girls' team, but in my region, Navarra, there were no teams,' Natalia explains. 'I didn't have the opportunities that girls have now to join a team. But I played with my friends because I really loved football. It was my dream to play in a team with girls!'

She remembers her mum calling all the clubs in the area, trying to find out if they had a girls' team, but no luck. Then, when Natalia

was around eleven or twelve years old, a group of small towns in the north of Navarra decided to create a girls' league. It was 'unofficial' because it wasn't being run by the Spanish Football Federation, but it was better than nothing.

Natalia's parents were supportive, driving her to play in the matches every weekend. When she was fourteen, a football coach called Iñaki Artola moved to the area. He began asking all the clubs in the region to set up girls' teams, and Natalia speaks fondly of the coach, calling him her 'mentor'.



The new team in Navarra that Natalia joined was called Lagunak, and they played in the first division. Natalia, who played in defence and midfield was now a member of an 'official' team for the first time. Natalia was now extremely busy. She was still at school, but she trained four days a week and travelled to matches at the weekend. Her mum, she says, was supportive, whilst her dad was 'a little unsure, he saw it was my passion.'

Later, Natalia went to university to study for a degree in Art History, alongside playing for Lagunak. Like some of the other women who feature in the book, she wasn't sure if she could make a full-time career in football 'because we didn't receive any money! Football was like a hobby!' However, Natalia had also realised very early on that she wanted to become a coach. 'I combined my degree at the university with studying to be a coach,' she explains. 'I was very focused on being a coach.'

Natalia says she was attracted to the idea of becoming a coach because 'football is something other than a sport. It's a way to create art... I wanted to understand it better.' When Natalia began studying to obtain her UEFA Pro Licence, there were around fifty people on the course – and Natalia was the *only* woman.

'I received a lot of comments,' Natalia remembers. 'You know, some positive, some negative.' Then she tells an amazing story about the time she had to perform a test in front of the other members of her course and the coaches who were training them. The ball was passed to Natalia by one of the coaches, and she was expected to control it. But when the ball was passed to her, it flew very high into the air. 'It was going up, up, up, up!' Natalia recalls. Everyone in the stands was watching in silence. Finally, the ball dropped, and Natalia did exactly what she was supposed to do – 'Well, at the end, the ball came to my chest, and I promise that never in my life had I shown better control. I don't know how I did it, but it was perfect. Perfect! And all the boys and the men were quiet.' Natalia says it was like a moment in a movie!

After that, a lot of the boys on the coaching course told Natalia, 'You are good!' Natalia realised that, 'they needed to see my technical abilities to respect me. And this is interesting, because with a man or a boy, they don't do that.'

It was a long process for Natalia to earn her coaching licence. 'I studied the first level, and then you need to do one year of coaching at this level', Natalia explains. 'Then you study the second level, then you do one year of coaching at this level, and so on.' Natalia said it took her around six years to complete the course. The UEFA Pro Licence allows Natalia to coach around the world, at all levels.

Natalia's huge achievement - being the first woman in Spain to earn her coaching licence – generated a great deal of media publicity at the time, and because of this, Natalia realises she has a degree of visibility that most coaches don't have. She's a fantastic role model for girls who'd love to follow the same career path, and now there are more and more women in Spain (and other countries) who are also doing the UEFA Pro Licence course. Natalia very generously says, 'If I can open some doors for other women, I am very happy to do that.'

The first big club in Natalia's coaching career was FC Barcelona Femení, the Barcelona women's team. 'Barcelona always seems like a big team,' Natalia says, 'but when I joined, the women's team was in the second division, and seeking promotion.'

To begin with, the female teams were generally considered

somewhat inferior to the male teams. Natalia and her team had to wait until the boys had finished training before they could start, and this meant they were training very late in the evening. Natalia says that she was coaching the women's team in the fields surrounding Barcelona's stadium, Camp Nou – the same fields that were used for match-day parking!

Gradually the status of women's football in Spain began to improve. Natalia and her team were given better areas to train in, they had access to the same medical staff as the men, and Natalia began attending meetings with the coaches of all the Barcelona teams, including Frank Rijkaard, the Dutch international who was the manager of the men's team at the time and Pep Guardiola among others.

'I was part of the structure at Barcelona,' says Natalia. 'All these small details helped us to improve, and in the end, we achieved our objective, promotion to the first division.'

Natalia moved on from Barcelona in 2006 to coach at other clubs, including a stint as Assistant Coach at Atlético de Madrid. Then she went to work in America. How did that come about?

Natalia tells how, when she was growing up in Spain, she saw a TV commercial one day that featured Michael Jordan, the famous and hugely successful basketball player alongside Mia Hamm, the very well-known female football player (or 'soccer player', as they say in the USA). Natalia remembers being totally amazed – 'The Americans put Mia Hamm on the same level as Michael Jordan! It was incredible!'

Natalia went to America to coach at two summer camps, and she saw how popular soccer was with girls. She explains what attracted her to working in the USA – 'The potential, the level of the players, the quality, the mentality was so great! I really wanted to go to a country where girls playing soccer is *normal*!'

Natalia began with club coaching in America, but she was soon working with one of the national teams – 'that was one of my dreams!' She was appointed Head Coach of the women's Under-17 team, and she took the team to the Under-17 World Cup in India in 2022. Natalia calls this 'a lifetime opportunity, a beautiful experience.'

However, Natalia was entering a new phase of her career. Since

2019, she'd been providing football commentary and analysis for Spanish channel Telemundo. Then, while coaching in the USA, she was asked to comment on the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. She was already experienced in this as she'd provided regular commentary on Barcelona's own channel, Barça TV. Natalia's involvement in the 2020 Olympics coverage was studio-based because of COVID. However, for the World Cup in 2022, Natalia was asked to go to Qatar as an expert analyst. She really wanted to do it 'because Qatar is a country where women are not very visible!'

After that, Natalia was asked to go to New Zealand and Australia in 2023 for the Women's World Cup, where she watched Spain win the trophy, beating England in the final 1-0. Natalia was still coaching at this time, but then she was offered a permanent job as an analyst – 'Now every weekend I do the Premier League, I do the US national team, NWSL, and La Liga. Now my primary job is to be a football analyst!'

So Natalia has had, not just one, but three different jobs in football. It's an amazing achievement. She still continues to coach, but now she's working for the US Soccer Federation coaching the new coaches! She loves teaching and talking about 'the beautiful game', whether she's coaching or on TV.

Asked about her career highlights, Natalia picks out some of her best moments, one of them being when she joined the first team in the north of Navarra, and she was able to play with girls, second, when Barcelona was



promoted to the first division. She also mentions that, when she was assistant coach with Atlético de Madrid, they won the first division. In the USA, she's had the amazing experience of seeing some of her players from her Under-17 team like Gisele Thompson, Riley Jackson, Emery Adames and more, go on to play professionally in the first division – 'And I say, oh my god, I was part of their journey!'

Natalia had difficulties and problems to overcome in her career, as we've seen with all the women whose stories are in this book. She's faced a lot of sexist comments, particularly when she was studying for her coaching licence – 'They said things like *Oh, a woman shouldn't be here!* and *A woman can't be here!*' Natalia thinks that some people in football believe she should keep quiet, because she's female – 'Sometimes they can try to make you think you don't belong there. Of course I belong there because I've been preparing all my life for this moment! I have the knowledge. But some people will try to undermine you – *oh, she's just a woman!*'. Natalia says that, 'We need female football mentors for girls. I think we need to support each other, right? This is very important to me.'

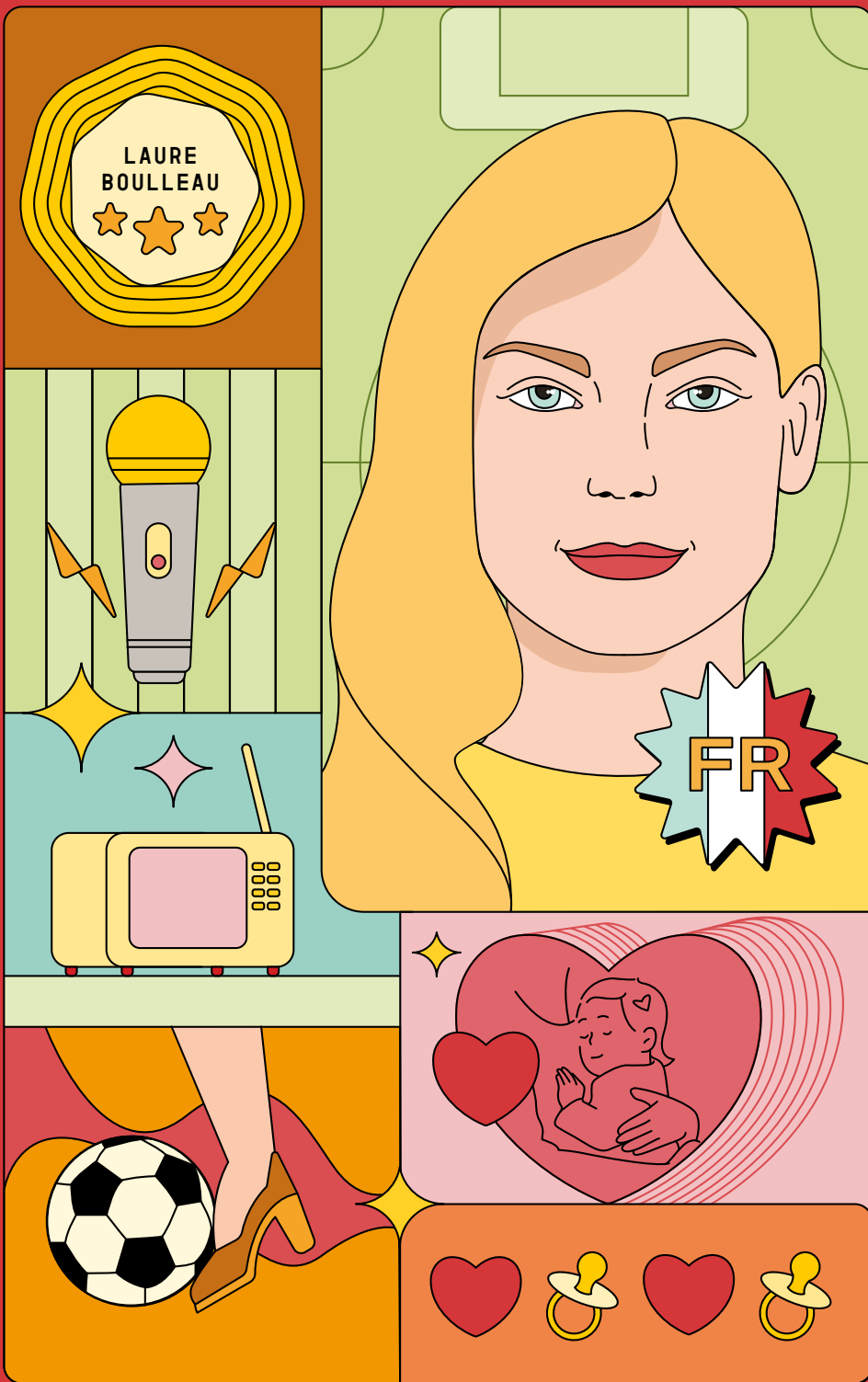
Natalia sees her future in the media for the moment, although she wants to continue coaching. However, she's prepared to wait for a good opportunity to come along. She's asked what advice she would give to girls who want a career in football, and Natalia is very clear about what it takes. 'Set your goals for the short term and the long term,' she advises. 'Surround yourself with team-mates, coaches and an environment that helps you grow. Be confident and resilient. Take care of your body and your mental health.' Natalia also adds, 'Celebrate your progress. Be present. Enjoy the moment.'

This is all wise and wonderful advice from someone who's worked extensively in the football world and achieved outstanding success. It was a real privilege to talk to this interesting and amazing woman.

NATALIA ASTRÁIN'S PLAY

CELEBRATE YOUR PROGRESS





LAURE BOULLEAU

'My earliest football memory is watching France win the World Cup in 1998,' Laure recalls with a smile. 'It was very special watching France win at home. That's very much when I fell in love with it, because it goes beyond just football. I really wanted to be one of those people who would bring joy to the whole of France. That's when I knew I wanted to wear that shirt.'

And Laure, who played at left-back, did, in fact, go on to wear the French shirt sixty-five times! Not only that, she also had an incredibly impressive career with Paris Saint-Germain, one of the top clubs in France. She's played very successfully at every level of the women's game. Even when Laure retired from playing, she continued to trail blaze and to reinvent herself, becoming the first female football consultant on French TV. Anyone who wants a career in football can learn so much from Laure's amazing journey.

So where and how did this glittering career begin? Laure was born in 1986 in Clermont-Ferrand, France. Her family were sports fans, and Laure used to play football with her two brothers, then later at school. She played football during break times and lunchtimes, sometimes even skipping lunch to get a game in!

'I mean, I was a bit of a tomboy anyway,' Laure explains. 'But I played all day, every day, all of the time.'

While Laure was improving her football skills, she didn't realise back then that girls could also play in clubs. In the 1990s, when she

was growing up, there weren't so many football clubs and leagues for female footballers in France, or, indeed, anywhere. But when Laure moved to secondary school, her talent for football caught the eye of one of the members of staff.

'He put me in touch with a local club that had a girls' team,' Laure remembers. 'So he was kind of my little lucky charm, as it were!'

Gradually Laure began to realise that she wasn't just a good player 'for a girl'. She was actually better than some of the older boys she was playing with! That's when she began to see football as a possible career move, rather than just a hobby.

'I didn't stay very long with the local club,' Laure says. 'I was put forward for the regional trials and then selected for the regional team. I began to be really serious about the sport. I knew I just wanted to do that. *I had to do it.*'



So how did Laure's family feel about this? She was lucky because she says her parents were very supportive.

'They gave me a lot of freedom to crack on with this,' says Laure, 'but they put no pressure on me. Particularly, they weren't those parents who will shout from the sidelines or anything like that!'

Laure's outstanding talent soon brought her even more attention, and she was invited to apply for a place at the Clairefontaine Training Centre in Paris. Clairefontaine is an elite football academy, set up by the French Football Federation to train the most talented young players in the country, in preparation for them joining the national teams. At this time, it was the only one in France - other academies opened later on - so it was a huge thing for Laure, who was still only a young teenager. But first she had to undergo different tests and trials to grab one of the highly-prized places.

'So I did all their tests to try and enter the sports study programme,'

Laure recalls, 'And I was accepted! I moved to Paris and spent five years training daily in the training centre.'

However, it's interesting to note that Laure kept up with her studies - 'I was all right in school' - and she kept going as far as her Baccalaureate (exams taken at the end of secondary school, before university). But it was clear that the super-talented Laure was now incredibly serious about making football her future career. She was signed by Paris Saint-Germain, and she began playing for them alongside playing for the French national team. She progressed through all the different stages (Under-17, Under-19, Under-21), before becoming a firm fixture in both the French and the Paris Saint-Germain teams.

Laure played club football for Paris Saint-Germain for fourteen years, and made an amazing 181 appearances for them! She won the Coupe de France trophy twice and also made it to two Champions League finals. Although Laure's team lost on both occasions, she describes the finals as 'exceptional moments'.

'I was always loyal and faithful to that particular club,' Laure says. 'And then alongside that, I also had an international career. I was really lucky, although I made my own luck! There was a lot of work involved.'

With France, Laure played in the 2013 Euro championships in Sweden and also in two World Cups, in 2011 in Germany and in 2015 in Canada. She also took part in the women's football tournament at the London Olympics in 2012, where France finished fourth.

Laure has obviously experienced many highlights during her fantastic career. When asked to name some of them, she says one of her best memories is singing the French national anthem, *La Marseillaise*, at the beginning of her very first Under-17 match for France. She was just fifteen years old at the time.

'It was a very, very big moment,' Laure recalls, 'But when you have a personality like mine, then you're always looking for the next target!'

What Laure means is that every time she reaches one level - achieves one ambition - it's then always about what she's going to strive for next. It's one of the reasons why she's such a great role

model for girls of all ages who'd love to follow the same career path. 'So there was my first selection, and then I wanted to be one of the main players, and then I wanted to make the French team, and then I wanted to win titles!'

Laure is an incredibly positive and driven person, but this doesn't mean she hasn't experienced her share of bad luck.

'I talk a lot about the good side and the glamorous side, but there were obviously some difficulties and some challenges,' she admits. After starting at the Clairefontaine academy, she suffered ruptured ligaments in her leg. Six months later, the same thing happened to her other leg! But in typical Laure fashion, she's found something positive in these injury setbacks at such a young age.

'They made me very resilient,' she says firmly. 'There was a strength, a resilience to having to get yourself back to fitness every time. Of course, the older I became, the more difficult that was, and so it's given me real mental strength and mental resilience. I've got a very strong mind, and I never give up!' Mental resilience is something that every professional sports person needs to develop if they want to progress in their chosen field.

Now, everyone knows that a footballer's career is a short one. And not everyone wants to go on playing for as long as Cristiano Ronaldo! In Laure's case, she decided to retire from football in 2018.

'So, we're never really ready to stop football,' she sighs. 'But I was tired mentally. I was tired physically.'

Laure made her decision in January 2018 to stop playing at the end of that season in June. She feels she was lucky because she had five or six months to prepare for retirement from the game and for whatever happened next. And she had no idea what that would be... 'When you've been training for twenty years, there's a bit of a confidence crisis. Can I be good at something else?'

Laure says again at this point that 'I was lucky, but I made my own luck.' She recognises that good career decisions she had made in the past helped to influence her future. 'Because I'd been so loyal to Paris Saint-Germain, the club were keen to offer me a post as sports co-ordinator for their female division.'

Laure's friends also suggested that she look for work in the media – maybe in TV – and Laure liked that idea. 'That's something I always enjoyed and loved,' she says enthusiastically. 'I liked the conversations. I loved answering questions. I always used to find it relatively easy.'

Word soon got around that Laure was planning to retire from football, and, very excitingly, she was approached by various French TV channels, inviting her to join them as a football expert. For Laure, it was a pretty easy decision to make – 'I chose the TV channel Canal+ because they were very much the best football channel as far as I was concerned, in terms of the quality of the broadcasting... And they were also the first channel to support girls' football!'

Joining Canal+, Laure became the first female French football consultant to work in the studio. But, as always, she set even higher standards for herself – 'I wanted to become better, and to become one of the main presenters, and to become the best and to challenge myself!'

Laure is now moving into documentary film-making. She's already made some films going inside French Ligue 1 clubs that give the viewer an 'immersive experience'. However, she's now looking to move out of her comfort zone by making documentaries that have very little to do with football. She's already filmed a documentary about women's rights in Japan that included an interview with a female sumo wrestler.



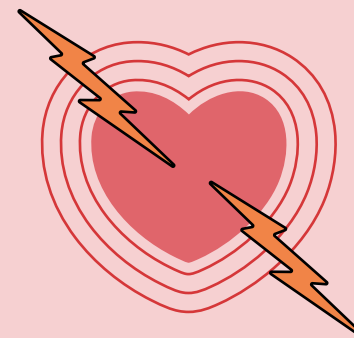
'If I allow myself to dream a little,' Laure says with a smile, 'perhaps in ten to fifteen years time, I'd love to be a director of a TV channel or a football club – but it'd be a men's one!'

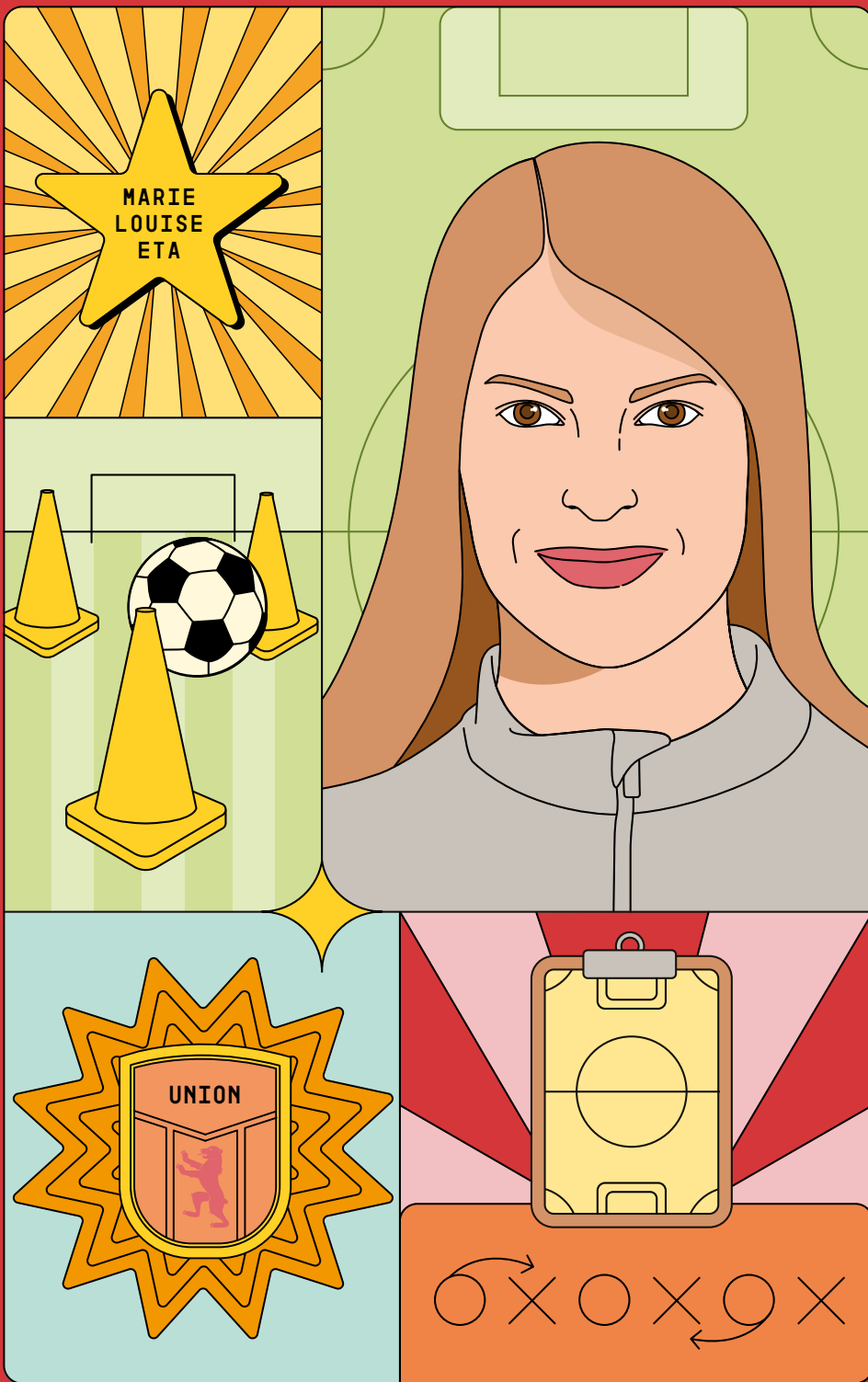
She's very passionate about girls' and women's rights, and she believes that the best way to challenge discrimination is with positivity, talking about female football and showing the players in a good light. Her advice to girls who'd like to make football their career is simple and straightforward – 'Do what you love and put energy into what you love to succeed. Don't give up and persevere!' She knows it's not always easy, and, in fact, it can be extremely difficult when things are going badly. But Laure suggests looking to other people to find that inspiration, mental strength and resilience she's talked about. She says that, when she was young, her hero was French footballer Zinedine Zidane.

Obviously, Laure herself is exactly the kind of trailblazing hero that anyone searching for inspiration could look up to. She has achieved so much in the world of football and she's continuing to break new barriers all the time. She says she 'wants to be President of her country', then laughs and says she's kidding, but maybe that will be her next target?!

LAURE BOULLEAU'S PLAY

PUT ENERGY INTO WHAT YOU LOVE TO SUCCEED





MARIE-LOUISE ETA

'Really, for as long as I've been able to walk, I've always had a football on me, pretty much,' says Marie-Louise Eta. She is a true trailblazer in the game. After retiring from her club and international career, she went on to become the first female coach to work for a team in the men's Bundesliga, the highest level of the German football league. It was a massive achievement, and Marie-Louise's work at her club Union Berlin has made headlines around the world. She is laid back, chatty and friendly, and her passion for football is evident in everything she says. Born in Dresden, Germany, in 1991, the game was an important part of her family life.

'My dad has always been football mad,' Marie-Louise continues, 'and he played himself at an amateur level. I've got two older sisters, and, I think to be honest, my dad really wanted to have a boy next, but he got me! But straight from the moment I was born, I had a football on me.'

Marie-Louise used to play football with her dad all the time. She also talks about playing football with her friends, first at nursery school and then later at primary school. Her friends were mostly boys 'because there weren't that many girls then who were into playing football, and so I've always had a lot of male friends that I played with.'

Some of our other trailblazers have mentioned that there were very few girls' football clubs around when they were growing up, and this was the same for Marie-Louise. The history of women's football

in Germany is very similar to other European countries with the authorities frowning upon any attempts to organise a women's league. It was claimed that women were too weak and fragile to play the sport without injuring themselves! Gradually things began to change in Germany, like they did in other countries, but it was a long, slow process.

Marie-Louise says that you didn't really hear about women's football in the media then either. So she had no female footballing role models – her idols were male players like David Beckham. 'I actually imagined that maybe one day I'd be playing in the same football club as him!' she laughs.



Marie-Louise also wasn't aware that there was a women's Bundesliga. 'That was actually something I found out much later,' she explains. 'I think it might have been because of the Women's World Cup final in the USA in 2003 when Germany beat Sweden with a 'golden goal' from Nia Künzer in extra time. That's when women's football got more attention.' If you've never heard of the 'golden goal' rule, it stated that the first goal scored in extra time would win the match and end the game immediately. FIFA scrapped the rule in 2004.

When Marie-Louise discovered that some of the boys she played with at school were part of a football club, she was determined to join too. She started there aged seven, and then joined her local team, Laubegast, which is a district of Dresden.

So how old was Marie-Louise when she started to realise she was actually good at football?

'It was maybe the point when I made it into a specialist grammar school for sports,' Marie-Louise replies. 'I was still playing at Laubegast, and, when I finished primary school, the question then arose – what school am I going to go to?'

It was Marie-Louise's PE teacher who recognised her talent and

suggested she should try out for the specialist sports school in her city. It was the place, Marie-Louise says, where the best players would go – mostly boys.

'That's when I first thought that maybe there is a prospect of me one day becoming a professional,' Marie-Louise says, 'and perhaps realising my dream of playing at the same club as David Beckham!'

Marie's family were very supportive of her decision, and her dad used to attend lots of her matches to watch. But then an opportunity came for Marie-Louise to move on to another specialist sports school in Potsdam. This was a boarding-school, about three hours away from Dresden and Marie-Louise's family. She was just thirteen years old at the time, but she knew she wanted to go.

'Of course my parents were sad in a way because the youngest was leaving home,' Marie-Louise says, 'but at the same time, they were really supportive and I'm grateful for that.' She adds that it was a 'massive step' for her to leave home at such a young age. Often our trailblazers have had to make difficult decisions to further their careers, and Marie-Louise was no exception. She adds that, after she moved to Potsdam, her parents attended her matches, 'they were very supportive, and they were also really proud of me.'

While at school, Marie-Louise played for the Potsdam youth team. Then, at the age of sixteen, she moved up to play for the first team in the women's Bundesliga while she completed her secondary school education.

After school, Marie-Louise moved to Hamburg to play for HSV, but things then became a little difficult. It had been quite a tough decision for Marie-Louise to leave Potsdam where she had close-knit friends, and her family had been relatively close by. But then, when she'd been in Hamburg for about a year, the club decided to cancel their women's team because they needed to make financial cutbacks. Marie-Louise had just met the man who'd become her future husband in Hamburg, so no way did she want to leave! 'I did consider what else I might do, apart from just pursuing a professional career in football,' she says. 'I actually started a university degree in sports management via distance learning.'

However, Marie-Louise soon found new clubs who were interested in taking her on – first Cloppenburg, and then Werder Bremen, where she played for four years. At the same time, she continued studying for her degree, and she also started training for her coaching licence. Marie-Louise was very sensibly giving herself plenty of options for her future – ‘I actually started preparing for my second career without really realising it was going to be my second career!’

From 2006 onwards, Marie-Louise was also playing for the German national team, progressing through the levels from Under-15 to Under-23. So she was incredibly busy! She has many club and country career highlights to look back on. When she was at Potsdam, she remembers beating Bayern Munich in the last match of the season, a win that secured the championship for Potsdam. Another stand-out memory for Marie-Louise is when Germany hosted the Women’s World Cup in 2011, and she took part in the competition – ‘I think this was the first time when you really got the massive audiences, where you had twenty thousand people in the crowd, and the German national anthem is being played for you, and you’re wearing the German national shirt. Even just thinking about it, I almost get tearful and get goosebumps.’

A different kind of highlight that Marie-Louise recalls is helping to save Werder Bremen from relegation by scoring in a penalty shoot-out – ‘It was a really nice way to round off my career when I finished playing at a relatively young age in in footballing terms.’

Marie-Louise retired from football at twenty-six years old which, as she says, is quite young. But she had her reasons. She trained to be a coach quite early in her career, and she says, ‘it became clear that you couldn’t do the two alongside each other.’ Marie-Louise really enjoyed the coaching side and wanted to take that further. She also had some injury issues at the time. ‘So I had to make a choice. And with hindsight, I think I’m glad I took that decision so early in my career.’

Marie-Louise says a lot of her team-mates and friends were surprised that she planned to quit playing football. But we see time and time again that sometimes there are difficult decisions to be made, and you just must have the strength of mind to choose the

career pathway that’s right for you. And that’s exactly what Marie-Louise did!

So how did Marie-Louise find the switch from player to coach? Did she find it difficult to change her mindset? Marie-Louise says, not at all – ‘I always found it really helpful actually to have that experience of being a player as well. It enabled me to put myself in the player’s position because I’ve felt those sensations too.’

Marie-Louise’s first steps into coaching happened alongside her husband, who was also then a footballer at German club Schwachhausen. During a chat with the Head of Sports at the club, Marie-Louise and her husband suggested that they should set up a women’s team. The club agreed, and they held an open day to recruit players. Marie-Louise also coached a couple of the boys’ teams at her old club, Werder Bremen. Between 2019 and 2020, she was co-coach of Germany’s Under-19 women’s team, and then the following year co-coach of the German Under-15 boys’ team. From 2022-3, she was co-coach of the German Under-17 boys’ team.

Then, in 2023, Union Berlin, a men’s club in the Bundesliga came calling, and Marie-Louise was offered the post of assistant coach for the club’s Under-19 team alongside head coach Marco Grote. This was a huge achievement anyway, but then, when Union Berlin’s manager left, Marie-Louise and Marco Grote were made joint assistant managers of the men’s team until a new manager was appointed.



This was massive news! If you search online, you'll see that Marie-Louise made headlines all over the world from Germany itself to the USA to the UK to India and many other countries. Marie-Louise was the first female coach to sit on the bench for a Bundesliga game, and a UEFA Champions League match (Union Berlin played Portuguese team, Braga). At the time, there were some dissenting voices that claimed women shouldn't have that type of role in the men's Bundesliga, but Marie simply got on with doing her job and doing it very well. She coached the women's Union Berlin team from 2024-5, and then in March 2025 it was announced that Marie-Louise would be head coach of the Under-19 team for the 2025-6 season.

So what are the qualities that Marie-Louise thinks make a great coach? 'It's really important to be authentic,' she says, 'to be true to yourself and genuine as a person. I think you need to be credible.' She also mentions having a love and enthusiasm for the game, as well as a good level of knowledge – 'And you've got to be able to convey that knowledge, and you've got to be able to lead a large number of people and be able to communicate well with them.'

Marie-Louise is very relaxed and laid back when asked about her hope for the future. 'For me, it's always worked really well to just go with the flow!' she says with a smile. 'I always wanted to play football at the top level, and now I'm coaching at the top level, and that's what I want to be doing.' She suggests 'just living in the moment and enjoying life. Things will work out if you work hard. Opportunities will come along!'

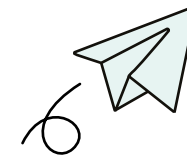
And what advice would Marie-Louise give to girls who'd love to follow in her footsteps?

'There's no such thing as impossible!' she says. And Marie-Louise herself is living proof of that!

MARIE-LOUISE ETA'S PLAY

THERE'S NO
SUCH THING AS
IMPOSSIBLE





MARIA SOLE FERRIERI CAPUTI

Our next trailblazer, Maria Sole Ferrieri Caputi, is a boundary-breaking Italian referee whose achievements are totally outstanding. She's refereed at every level of Italian football, and that includes becoming the first female referee to take charge of match involving a Serie A teams – when Sassuolo played Salernitana in the Coppa Italia in October 2022. Maria was also a member of the first all-female trio to oversee a Serie A men's match when Inter played Napoli in April 2024.

Not only that, Maria was one of the referees at the Women's World Cup in 2023 in Australia and New Zealand, *and* she also became the first Italian female to referee a men's international match, Germany vs Peru in 2023.

Wow, what a long list of amazing achievements! Maria is truly a record-breaker, not just once, but many times over. She has a very calm and focused manner that has surely helped her to be a huge success in her chosen profession. So let's look at how and where this brilliant woman began her career.

Maria was born in Livorno in 1990. She was very much into football at an early age – 'I always used to watch football. I was really interested. I read the main newspaper in Italy about football and sport.'

Maria vividly remembers going to the local stadium with her father to watch the Livorno men's team play, when she was around eight or nine years old. When asked if she enjoyed the whole

atmosphere in the stadium, the shouting, the chanting, she replies, 'So much! It was really, really amazing!'

When she was about eight years old, Maria asked if she could join her local football club, but her parents were not keen. 'My parents were concerned about the quality of the club in our city,' Maria explains. 'In general, my parents are not the kind of parents who say no. But in this situation, they said no.'

So how did Maria find her way into refereeing? It was by a lucky chance, to be honest! When she was sixteen years old, Maria used to ride a motorbike to school. One day she found a flyer had been left on her bike. It was a leaflet about a course to train to be a referee.

Maria was very excited about this and discussed it with some of her friends – 'And we say OK, let's do it!' They all applied to do the course. However, Maria adds that, 'After one week, one stopped. After one month, another stopped. After one year, I was alone!'



Maria was determined to complete the course because, as she says – 'I love football, and, for me, it was a different way into the football world.' Another attraction for Maria was that referees in Italy are allowed to go into stadiums and watch some games for free. And also when she started refereeing at a young age, it gave her independence because she got paid – 'You receive a small amount, but for me it was enough to pay for my vacation. So I didn't have to ask my parents 'Oh, I need money for pizza, I need money for my vacation,' because I already had my small job.'

Maria's parents were supportive of her becoming a referee, although Maria says her mum was also a little worried. She thought Maria might become a target for abuse, especially as she was refereeing at a local level – 'because many, many younger referees are abused or bullied.' However, Maria doesn't seem to have experienced

anything she wasn't able to handle.

The refereeing course lasted around two months. The main part of the course was learning about the laws of the game and analysing different match situations on video. Maria says she also started physical fitness training during this period – 'But when you start, the physical demand is not so high. It increases during your career when you progress through the levels.'

It wasn't only Maria's friends who left the refereeing course. The drop-out rate overall was high. Maria had the focus and the determination to stick it out because she was really highly motivated. Boys outnumbered girls on the course, and Maria was one of only two girls to complete it.

'It's difficult, you know,' Maria says thoughtfully, 'because you have to give up your Sunday, your Saturday activity, and sometimes you receive offensive gestures! Sometimes you arrive at the point that you ask yourself – why do I have to spend my Sunday with this?!' Maria goes on to answer her own question, saying that to be a referee, 'You have to have a really great passion.'

After she completed the course, Maria began to referee children's matches. She explains that in Italy there are many different levels or categories to progress through as a player and as a referee – 'I spent eighteen years of my life in this process! Yes, in Italy it's a long process to arrive at the top.'

From the children's matches, Maria moved on to semi-professional matches, then to professional games and that record-breaking moment when she became the first female referee to take charge of a men's Serie A match. That surely must be a career highlight for her? Maria agrees and also mentions the 2023 Women's World Cup as another time she looks back at very fondly. She thinks that there's no special kind of personality that makes a good referee – 'I think the most important thing is that everyone should be true to themselves.'

Education is obviously very important to Maria. She has an impressive string of educational qualifications, including a degree from the University of Pisa in Political Science and International Relations, a Masters in Sociology from the University of Florence

and a PhD from the University of Bergamo.

'Refereeing is not a profession for us until the top two men's divisions,' Maria points out. 'So you have to have an activity that you can do in your free time.' She goes on to describe having a very demanding schedule in her mid-twenties when she was combining studying with refereeing. She still has a job outside of football, working as a researcher one day a week.

What aspects of being a referee does Maria enjoy most? She mentions in particular that she loves having discussions with her colleagues, sharing their passion for the game. A very happy time in her life was when she refereed at regional level and she enjoyed the team meetings she had with her friends and colleagues, where everyone had the same hopes and dreams – 'Who knows if I can reach national level?'

We all know that referees are often put under a lot of pressure, especially in top-flight games. Maria acknowledges that it's sometimes a little more difficult for her – 'Because they say, of course, we are women in a man's sport.' There is more attention on her because of this, and a feeling that women have to 'prove themselves' more than a man would in the same position. However, Maria thinks her referee role is 'a privilege, it's a responsibility, and I want to do good things. I want to be a good example.'

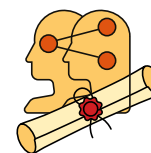
Maria is definitely a fantastic role model for girls who'd love to follow in her footsteps. There still aren't many top-tier female referees in Italy, but Maria points out that for the top two divisions, there are only forty-six referees in total anyway. She confidently expects that in the years to come, more women will join that group. Obviously the physical training is demanding at the highest level, and Maria admits this – 'We have to train more than the men to reach the same level.' But she adds very confidently, 'We can do it!'

As for the quite controversial introduction of VAR into the modern game, Maria has no hesitation in saying that she likes it! She has no problem being corrected by VAR if she makes 'a mistake'. She's happy to admit she was wrong if VAR shows that she needs to change her decision – 'You cannot correct your mistake if you don't have VAR! For referees, it is a very good help.'

Maria's routine on match-days varies according to whether the game is a lunch-time kick-off or an evening one. If the game is at mid-day, she'll wake up and have a reasonably big breakfast – 'bread with marmalade, cappuccino!' – because she won't eat lunch until after the game is over. Maria meets with her assistants, they change into their official uniforms and then they start their preparations for the match.

Maria instructs her assistants in what she wants and expects from them during the game. 'We set our standards and our way of communicating in different situations,' she explains. 'So I will say 'Please speak like this in *this* situation. Don't speak if you are not sure.'" They also discuss the style of the two teams involved in the match and the way they usually play. For example, they might look at how the teams deal with set pieces like corners or direct free kicks, so they can anticipate any problems. When refereeing in the top division, Maria also has a match analyst who works with her and her assistants, discussing possible tactics to deal with different situations – for example, when should Maria give a verbal warning to players, or when should she just keep a close eye on a developing situation?

Like French referee Stephanie Frappart, another of our trailblazers, Maria also enjoys the atmosphere in the stadium before kick-off, and then she blocks everything out – 'You have to only be focused on the match.'



At the top levels of football, pressure on the referee can be particularly intense. Does Maria find it hard to relax after a game? She doesn't have a special routine for winding down afterwards, but she admits that if there was no VAR and she is sure she made a mistake, that she 'overthinks' it – 'I have to do better than this!' But she tries to relax and 'to enjoy my dinner, my evening, check in with my family.'

A couple of days later, Maria then watches the whole match again on her laptop! So many of our trailblazers talk about always wanting to be better, to learn more and to improve, even when they're at the top of their profession, and Maria is obviously no exception.

'I prefer to do this one or two days afterwards because I want to have a clean mind,' Maria explains. 'Straight after the match, you sometimes still have emotion.' So Maria waits for a day or two to put some time and distance between herself and the game she's just refereed. Then she watches her performance with a critical eye, always determined to do better in the future.

Like players, referees can't keep refereeing for ever! So does Maria have any plans for her future? She'd like to continue for as long as she can, but realistically she thinks she may stop around the age of forty-two or forty-three – 'I don't know if I can stay so many years at this level.' However, Maria would like to stay linked to football in some way.

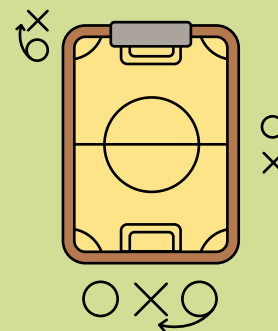
And what advice would an amazingly successful woman like Maria give to girls who want a career in football? 'Enjoy every match, and if you feel you have passion, that you enjoy what you do, then do it!' Maria also points out that it doesn't matter if an activity is defined as 'male' or 'female' – 'You have to follow what you like!'

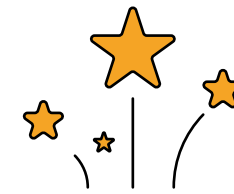
And Maria has followed her own great advice, showing such dedication to her profession and so much determination to reach the top.

Brava, Maria!

MARIA SOLE FERRIERI CAPUTI'S PLAY

× ENJOY
 EVERY MATCH,
 ENJOY WHAT
 YOU DO





STEPHANIE FRAPPART

Stephanie Frappart has achieved a staggering amount of 'firsts' in her amazing career. She was the first female to referee a French Ligue 1 match in 2019. Ligue 1 is the top league in France, the equivalent of the UK Premier League. Then she was the first woman to referee a major men's European match, the UEFA Super Cup final between Liverpool and Chelsea, also in 2019.

Not only that, she was also the first woman to take charge of a men's UEFA Champions League match *and* the first female referee at a men's FIFA World Cup in 2022 in Qatar. Stephanie is an absolute trailblazer with a truly amazing record! Now considered one of the best referees in the world, her journey to the top of her profession is a fascinating one, and she has plenty of advice to give to anyone who longs to follow in her footsteps.

Stephanie was born in Plessis-Bouchard in 1983. She began playing football at school and enjoyed it, but as she grew a little older, she also became interested in football theory.

'So around the age of thirteen, I decided I wanted to understand more about football, about the law of the game,' Stephanie remembers. There were no football referees in Stephanie's family, nor did she know any referees. She was just motivated to learn more about the background to the game she loved.

This quickly led to Stephanie combining playing football with refereeing. Once qualified, she began taking charge of youth games,

while still young herself.

'So I was playing on Saturday and refereeing on Sunday,' Stephanie explains. 'It was, I think, a good option for me to do both at the same time.' Playing football alongside refereeing meant Stephanie was seeing the game from both angles, and it obviously helped her to develop the skills that she displayed later in her career.

After school, Stephanie went on to university to study to become a sports teacher. She's definitely a sports fan, not just a football fan! 'I like all the sports, the World Cup, the Olympic Games, all the wonderful events. Outside of football, I prefer individual sports like athletics, swimming.'

But while at university, Stephanie found her life had become far too busy. She was now studying, but she was also still playing football on Saturdays and refereeing on Sundays – 'so I had to decide whether to continue to play or to referee.'



Decision-making is a very important part of managing any career, not just a career in sport. At this point in her life, Stephanie decided to stop playing football and to concentrate on refereeing instead. She explains her decision by saying that she felt she had more chance of succeeding at refereeing back then, as women's football was not particularly big in France – it was a similar story in the rest of Europe and, indeed, the world at that time.

This decision was obviously a major turning-point in Stephanie's career. Asked if she had any role models growing up, she says no – when she watched football, she watched the game, not the referee! And, besides, she says, 'At that time there were no women referees and no top women players. No-one was thinking about whether it's possible to be a referee or a top player because on TV you only saw men playing football!'

When Stephanie reflects on the choice she made back then, to concentrate on refereeing, she says that this was her decision at the time, but she adds 'perhaps today it could be a different decision because now in France there's a (female) team in every city. It was not the same twenty years ago.'

Nowadays, women's football is everywhere, and girls who want to play usually have a wide range of clubs to choose from. Women's games are shown on prime-time TV, and female football commentators and pundits are no longer considered unusual. But as Stephanie points out, things were very different years ago, and it makes her achievements and those of the other women in this book all the more exceptional.

However, Stephanie is keen to make it clear that she's never been someone who wants to be 'in the first place'. Instead she's someone who always prefers to be in the background.

'I guess that's important for a referee,' she says with a smile. 'You know, it's about the game, not necessarily about yourself, right?'

We all know that referees are often bitterly criticised by managers, players and fans for some of the decisions that they make. Stephanie is very aware of this and says that the thing she always hopes for is that no-one talks about her at the end of the game! Sometimes the comments about the referee's performance are positive, but this doesn't happen very often. Mostly the comments tend to be negative as everyone has an opinion about a referee's decision, and they're happy to voice them. But Stephanie is pleased if no-one talks about her when a game she's refereed comes to an end – she considers that a 'win' for herself!

Stephanie definitely accepts that being a referee can be a challenge and a heavy responsibility, but it's worth it because of her love of the game. 'Football is the beginning and end of everything. I never became a referee because I *wanted* to be a referee. I became a referee because I loved football.'

One of the most important things a referee has to do is to make quick decisions. Can you imagine how difficult that must be when you have thousands of football fans in a stadium yelling at you?! Stephanie explains that 'it's important to make the decision. But it's

also important to try to avoid emotion when you make the decision.'

You've probably realised by now, if you haven't already, that a referee's job is a stressful and high-pressured one! Stephanie feels that it's very important to try and manage the stress that comes along with it. Like the players, the referees have coaches to help their physical and mental well-being. Obviously referees need to be very physically fit to keep up with the pace of play, especially at the higher levels of the game. No football fan is going to be happy if an unfit referee can't keep up with the action and is too far down the other end of the pitch to see a clear-cut penalty! Referees also have help from the coaches to keep up to date with the rules of the game – the off-side rule, for example, has changed many times over the years.

Stephanie explains that the coaches also teach them how to focus and concentrate. They ask the referees to visualise potential situations on the pitch, in order to be ready for anything and everything.

'The most difficult part is to have consistency in all football games because every decision, every situation is different,' Stephanie points out.

Over the years, Stephanie has been at the forefront of change in the world of football – 'now we have more and more women referees at the top level'. Her biggest and most important achievement, she feels, was being one of three women who were chosen to officiate at the men's World Cup in Qatar in 2022 - 'the World Cup, it's the best, the best competition in the world, along with the Olympic Games.' So how did she cope with the pressure of being on the world stage, with not just thousands of people watching her in the stadium, but millions of people watching her on TV all around the world? Stephanie replies that it was actually easier than when she refereed her first Ligue 1 match in France in 2019. Both times the media pressure was intense, but all the publicity in France meant that she was also recognised wherever she went. She didn't have that problem in Qatar.

Match days are obviously the most important times of a referee's career. Stephanie has a routine before the game that helps her to stay focused 'only on what we have to do.' She admits that she finds it difficult to enjoy the atmosphere in the stadium, and, in fact, she

tries to block it out 'because we are so focused on making decisions, we can't enjoy the atmosphere of the game. So I think I enjoy maybe about twenty per cent of the atmosphere. I enjoy the atmosphere until the first kick-off!' After that, Stephanie, says, it's impossible to soak up the atmosphere because all her focus has to be on making those important decisions that can change the course of a game.

Like footballers, a referee's career usually comes to an end when they get older, especially for a referee at the top level, like Stephanie. For anyone who wants a professional career in football (or indeed in most sports), this always has to be a consideration – what do you do when you can't compete at the same level anymore? Is it possible to do something else within the same world? Or is it best to go off and do something completely different?

So does Stephanie have any plans for the future? At the moment she's working with the football authorities in France to develop further opportunities for female referees.

'I don't know if I will stay all my life connected to refereeing,' Stephanie says, 'because it's already twenty, close to thirty years, that it's been my life.' She believes she might choose to do something different in the future 'because it's good to step outside of what you know and see other things.' She's also been working with business companies who want to study how referees work – 'they want to understand how referees make decisions, how they manage the players, how they manage the pressure.' The companies can then take these tools and use them to improve the way their businesses work.



Stephanie is confident that women's football will continue to grow, improve and move forward, but she's very aware that it all takes time – 'They say, OK, we want to be at the same level as the men. But the men have been building the sport for more than one hundred years! So we can't be at the same level. But for sure now, we have seen big, big steps for the women's game.' The support of football's big governing bodies like UEFA and FIFA for the women's game is very important, but Stephanie thinks there is still a long way to go.

'We need to change the mentality of football because it's too masculine,' she says. 'We have many years in front of us to change the mentality. But it's not only the mentality in football. It's also in society!'

It's important for girls who are pursuing sporting careers to have role models exactly like Stephanie herself, and she agrees – 'because when you saw only male referees, male players, male coaches, you can't imagine that it's possible!'

And what advice would Stephanie give girls who'd love a career in football or another sport?

'Always try to do what you want,' she says firmly, 'and always do everything you can to achieve what you want!'

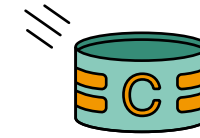
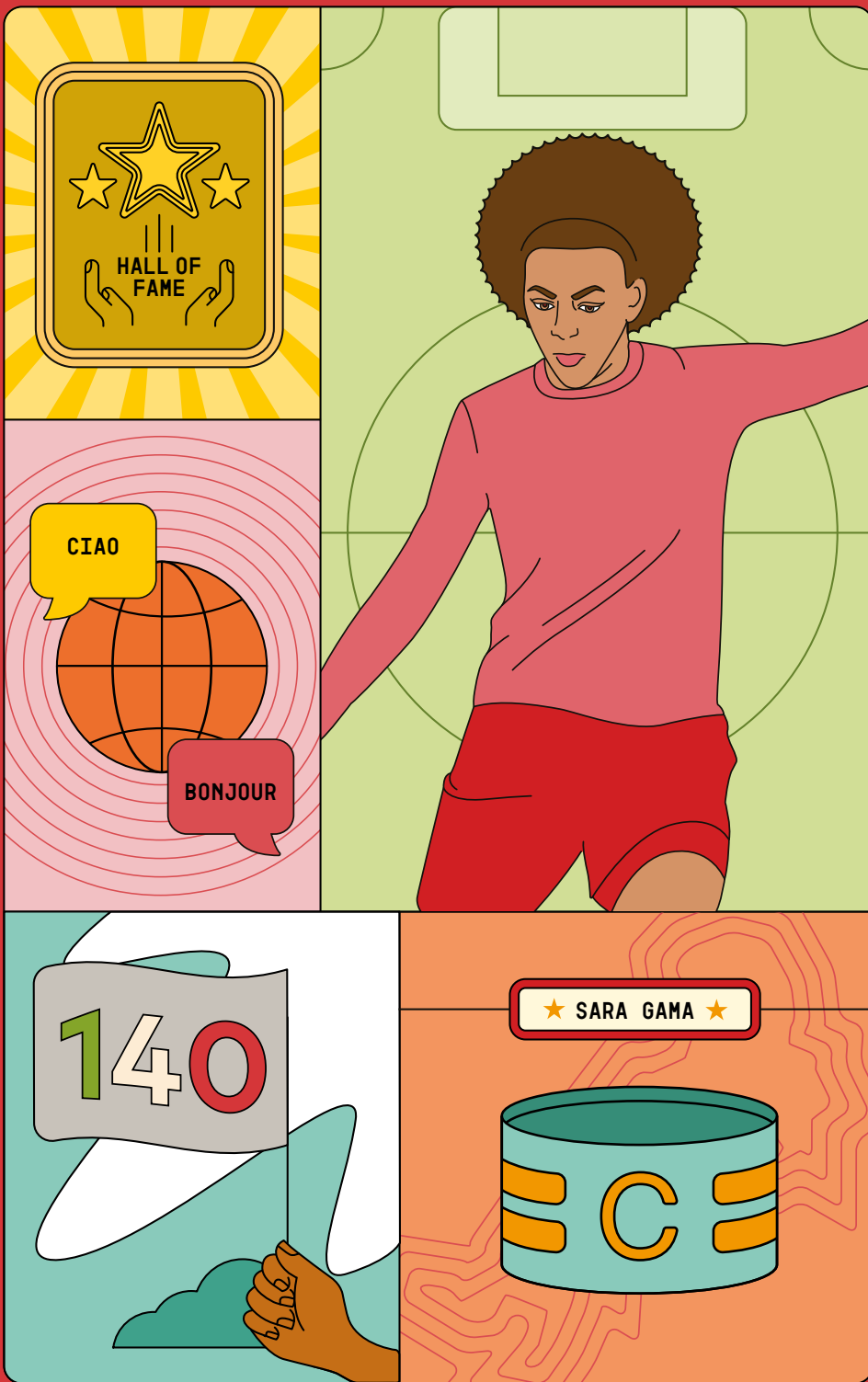
When Stephanie went to Qatar for the World Cup, she was quoted as saying, 'I'm not tall. I'm not as strong as some of my male colleagues. But I'll still make myself heard anyway.'

That sounds like a great lesson for life from Stephanie – make yourself heard!

STEPHANIE FRAPPART'S PLAY

MAKE YOURSELF HEARD





SARA GAMA

'My earliest memory of football is that I was always playing with a ball,' Sara Gama explains, when asked about her childhood. 'I don't know why, because in my family, no-one used to play football. They used to watch it, a bit, but they were more into bikes and stuff! I remember my grandpa giving me a ball as a gift, and I was always playing football with my friends in the street where I lived.'

And this is where the career of one of Italy's top female players began! Sara was born in Trieste in 1989. Her position on the pitch is centre-back, and she's played football at the highest level for both club and country. She currently plays in Serie A for the Juventus women's team and is also their captain. Not only that, Sara has made one hundred and forty appearances for her country, Italy, and is the fourth most-capped female Italian player. She retired from international football in 2024.

Sara is undoubtedly a trailblazer in women's football. She's a powerhouse, bursting with enthusiasm for the game, but equally very vocal about the need for change and improvement. She's someone who talks very quickly and passionately – in several different languages! Sara speaks Italian, English, French and Spanish. She's obsessed with football, and it's been one of the most important things in her life. Several times she mentions how important it is to be 'passionate' about what you do.

An important turning-point in Sara's journey happened when she

was just seven years old and the parents of one of her friends suggested that she should join a football club. So for the next four or five years, Sara played in mixed youth teams with her friends. Other teams noticed her talent, and she was asked to join an all-girls team, Polisportiva San Marco. At first, Sara was reluctant to move and leave all her friends behind. But after attending a summer camp run by the club, she committed and made the move.

Sara's story isn't the only one in the book where girls have had to make difficult decisions. It's all about seizing those special opportunities whenever they come along. Anyone who wants to achieve something special in life has to be prepared to step out of their comfort zone. Sara did just that.



However, Sara's new team was really suffering from lack of money, and soon other teams came calling. Tavagnacco, a team in the women's Serie A, wanted Sara to join them. Sara agreed and was utterly amazed when she was given one hundred euros for expenses! She'd never been paid before because women's football in Italy was only played at an amateur level at that time. So it was pretty much impossible to make a living as a female player.

'For me, it was incredible!' she says. 'I couldn't play as a professional – it was just for fun at that point. And before that, I was *paying* to play, because we had to help the team out!'

Sara's family were supportive of her playing football. Which was lucky, because Sara was very decisive about it herself - 'my ideas were very clear. I wanted to play, and I just played.' Sara's grandpa and mother were particularly supportive, although Sara says with a grin that her mum knew nothing about football!

'I've heard lots of stories about people who were not supported by their families,' Sara admits. 'But my family was very chilled out.'

From Tavagnacco, Sara moved to play for Chiasiellis. However, she continued to live at home because she wanted to complete her education – 'I wanted to finish high school because I cared about my studies.' She also didn't really want to leave her family or the area where she grew up, even though she was getting offers from other clubs.

But after suffering a serious knee injury in an international game against Brazil, Sara began to spread her wings. She went on loan to Pali St Blues, an American soccer club, and then she returned to Italy to join Brescia, who played in Serie A. Sara spent a year there and then moved to a top French club, Paris Saint-Germain, where she played as a professional for the first time – 'I had it in my mind that once I left my home region, you know, that I had to challenge myself.'

Sara returned to Brescia after two years at Paris-Saint-Germain. While Sara was at the club, Brescia completed the treble during the 2015-16 season, winning the Serie A championship, the Coppa Italia and the Italian Super Cup. They also reached the quarter-finals of the UEFA Champions League.

One of Sara's most important decisions was to go to university. She thought it was sensible to continue to study because, as we've seen, it was almost impossible to make a living as a female footballer in Italy at that time. Sara tells the story of an older team-mate of hers who quit the national team when she received the offer of a good job – 'it was sad, but it was a wise move because there were no prospects.'

So Sara chose to study foreign languages and literature at university. She knew she'd miss some classes because of football, but she thought it was worth it – 'I studied because it was just so important to do something around football, because you never knew what might happen with injuries and stuff.' However, the status of female football in Italy was about to change because one of the oldest and most famous Italian clubs, Juventus, had decided to form a women's team.

The history of women's football in Italy is an interesting one! The first women's football club was formed in 1933 in Milan – the girls played the match wearing petticoats – and soon other cities began organising girls' teams. However, the Italian authorities soon swooped in and put a stop to this.

But over the next thirty or forty years, women's teams began popping up in different parts of the country. In 1968 the Italian Women's Football Federation was set up, followed by the first (unofficial) Women's World Cup in 1970 and eventually women footballers in Italy got their own amateur league.

So after Juventus announced in 2017 that they were planning to set up a women's team, they signed several players from Brescia, including Sara herself.

'I got a call from the first women's coach at Juventus, Rita Guarino,' Sara explains. 'She told me, 'You know, Sara, this is a big project!' They also told me that I would be at the centre of that, but I didn't know what they meant.'

What it meant was that Juventus wanted Sara to captain their new women's team. She didn't say yes to the offer immediately, but after talking to people at Juventus, Sara decided to accept it because it was 'a great opportunity'. All in all, seven women from Brescia's team, including Sara moved to Juventus.

'It was quite a shock for Brescia,' Sara admits. 'But actually they managed to stay strong and rebuild the team.'

Sara tells the story of how, in her first season at Juventus, her team played Brescia in the last match of the season to determine which of them would win the championship. After a penalty shoot-out, Juventus won and took the title.

Leaving for Juventus was obviously a huge move for Sara – 'when I arrived at Juventus, it was like a dream come true. It was incredible!' And during the years that followed other top clubs in Italy – AC Milan, Roma, Inter Milan – also started women's teams.

Alongside playing for Juventus, Sara was beginning to move swiftly through the different levels of the national team. After the Under-17s, she played for the Under-19s, and one of her best memories is of receiving a gold medal when the team won the European Championships in 2008. Not only was Sara the team captain, she was also included in the UEFA Team of the Tournament! Sara also played her first match for the Italian team at just seventeen years old, going on to become captain in 2014.

Women's football in Italy came under the spotlight after Sara moved to Juventus. The Italian men's team had failed to qualify for the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia, and this was a huge talking-point in Italy. However, the women's team *did* qualify for the 2019 FIFA World Cup in France, and suddenly women's football began getting a lot more attention in Italy than it had ever done before.

'So we qualified for the World Cup, and it was a huge thing in Italy, because we qualified after twenty years, and the men didn't,' Sara explains. 'But it was an opportunity for us, and people were talking about that... We were very, very scared, but also happy, and we enjoyed every moment!' The Italian team were knocked out of the competition in the quarter-finals, but they'd made a big impact in their home country.

Finally, in the 2022-23 season, the Italian women's Serie A league turned professional. Sara was already involved with the players' union – 'I was trying to make our conditions better.' Sara spoke out in support of proper rights for female football players. She'd played as a professional for Paris Saint Germain in France, but now she wanted the same status in her home country. At last women footballers could be paid a regular wage, and they would have pension rights and maternity rights, as they would in any other job – 'I think that becoming a professional is one of the most important things,' Sara says. 'Because now we have dignity.' She adds, 'It's just incredible to be professional today!', as if she still can't quite believe it.



Although Sara believes this is a huge step forward for Italian women's football, she feels that there's also still room for improvement in Italy, to compete with the top footballing nations like Spain and Germany. She points out that UEFA has pledged to invest one billion euros in women's football between 2024 and 2030 in order to make it the most-played female team sport at both grass roots and professional level – 'Everyone thinks that women's football is on the way to growing!'

Sara's career path hasn't always been an easy one, and anyone searching for inspiration could easily find it in the way Sara has tackled various setbacks. She's experienced different types of prejudice during her long and highly-decorated career – 'We all know that it wasn't very common to have a girl play football, but this never stopped me! Maybe it stopped other girls who weren't as strong as me.' During Sara's long and highly-decorated career, she's shown grit and determination when dealing with the different challenges that come along with being such a talented, and therefore a high-profile, player.

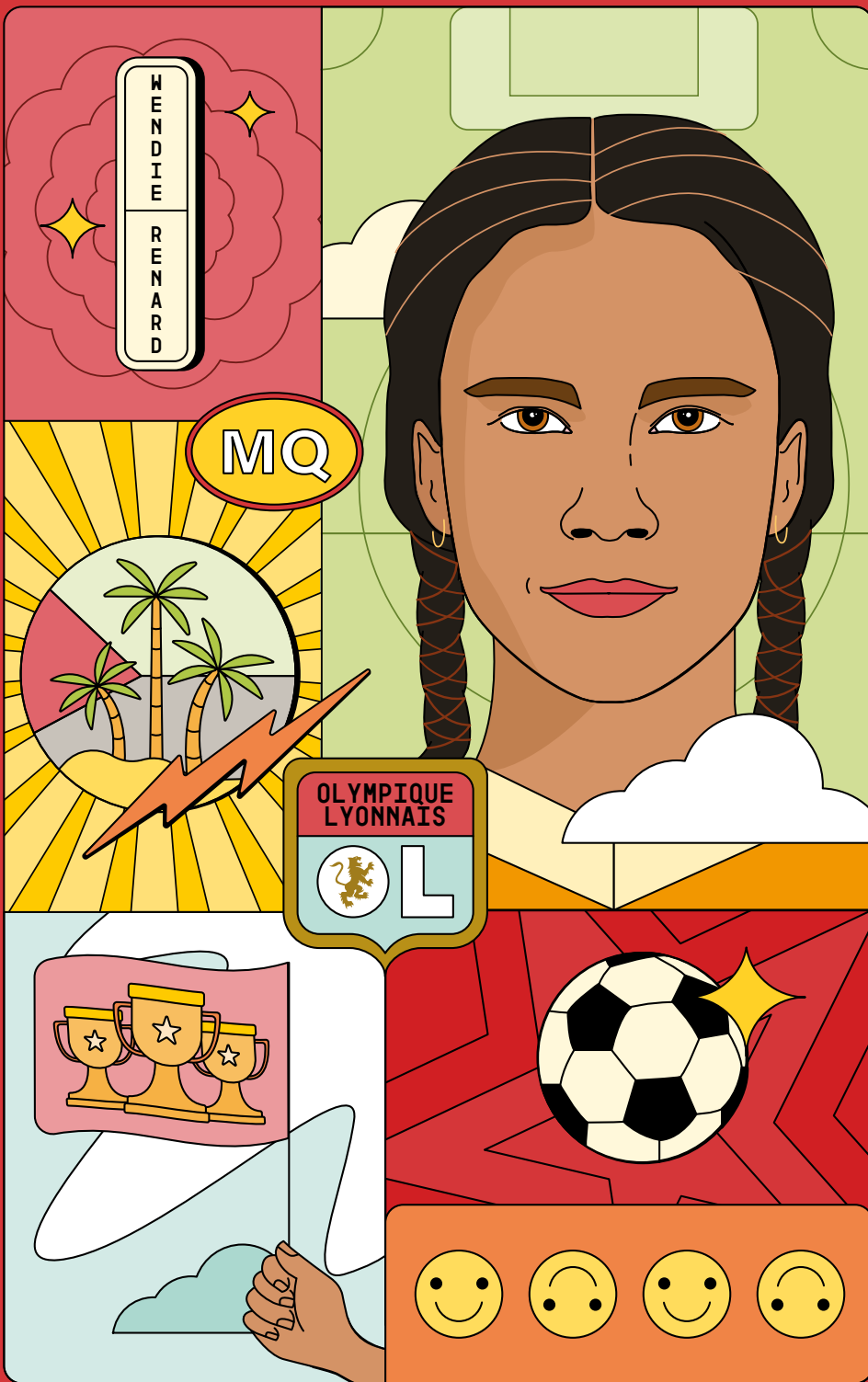
Like other footballers whose stories feature here, Sara has had problems throughout her career with injuries. In fact, she mentions when we're talking that she's injured right now. When she moved to Paris Saint-Germain to play as a professional for the first time, she feels that maybe she pushed her body a little too hard. After suffering an achilles injury, she couldn't play for quite a while. But Sara looks back on her experience in France very positively – 'I learned so much there, and I still have a lot of friends in the club, so it was a great experience.' For Sara, injuries are part of playing the game she loves.

And finally, what advice would Sara give to any girls who'd love a career in football, or any sport? Her answer is clear – 'It doesn't matter which sport – football or another – the thing is to have fun. To be passionate. It's good to have a goal, of course, but you need to have fun because there *will* be obstacles in your way. You need to love the game. You just want to play. The secret is to have fun, to be passionate!'

SARA GAMA'S PLAY

♥ YOU NEED
♥ TO LOVE
THE GAME ♥





WENDIE RENARD

Wendie Renard is one of the most famous and most-decorated players in the world. She has won numerous league titles and trophies and has blazed an unforgettable trail through women's football that is uniquely her own. Captain of both her club, Lyon, and her country, France, Wendie, a centre-back, has been on the winning side in eight UEFA League finals and she holds the record for the most appearances in the competition. Wendie's long-range passing is brilliantly accurate, and she's a fantastic tackler. All this, and she scores goals too, using her height particularly well in set-pieces. Wendie is an incredibly imposing presence on the pitch, but in conversation, she is extremely likeable – very smiley and friendly, with a great sense of humour.

Wendie was born in the Caribbean on the island of Martinique, an overseas region of France, in 1990. 'I just wanted to play football,' she says simply, when she's asked about her childhood. Wendie was an athletic, energetic kid who 'always had a ball on me'. She often played handball with her family and friends – it's a fast-paced sport with two teams who try to score by throwing the ball into the opposing team's goal. Wendie remembers that she used to take the handball and use it as a football!

When Wendie was seven years old, she joined a boys' team. Many of our trailblazers played in mixed teams when they were young, because of a lack of girls' football clubs, and Wendie was no different. However, Wendie feels that, for her, playing with boys was a good thing

– ‘It was seriously my best moment to play with boys because I learned a lot. You need to play fast. Stay strong. Have character.’

Football was part of Wendie’s family life because her aunt was a referee! Wendie sometimes went to watch her aunt referee senior games across Martinique, and she enjoyed it, ‘because I watched the game differently.’ At one time, Wendie thought that she might become a referee herself, but she says that it was difficult to earn a living from it.



So when did Wendie realise that she wanted a career in football? She smiles. ‘It’s so strange to say this now that I’m a success!’ she replies, ‘but when I was eight years old, I was watching a French World Cup game on TV. And I told my mum that soon she’d be able to watch *me* on the TV!’ Wendie’s mum thought she was joking, but Wendie adds, ‘My only objective was to succeed, to follow my dream, to work every day because it’s not easy. But when you have a dream, it’s important to follow it and to stay confident in yourself.’

At fifteen years old, Wendie began attending the island’s premier football academy, completing her studies and playing football. It was a ninety-minute journey across Martinique to the academy, from one side of the island to the other, and Wendie’s mum used to take her there on Monday morning for the start of the week. When Wendie talks about her life in Martinique, her family are always a huge part of her memories. Sadly, Wendie’s father died when she was young, but she obviously has very strong, loving bonds with her mum and her sisters and her wider family. Her family were also very supportive of Wendie’s ambition to make a career in football – ‘Yeah, everyone in my family supported me because it was my dream. I only had one objective. It was to succeed in this profession.’

Wendie knew that, to achieve her dream, she’d have to leave

Martinique and travel to mainland France. The Regional Technical Director of Football in Martinique, Jocelyn Germé, supported Wendie’s ambition, and a trial was fixed up for her at Clairefontaine, the French Football Federation’s training academy in Paris. But Wendie was just sixteen years old, and France was thousands of miles away. ‘I said, OK, thank you for this, I really appreciate it,’ Wendie recalls. ‘But it’s hard. I live in Martinique, we have the sun every day. I have my family here. But now I need to make the decision to leave and realise my dream.’

Wendie’s mum was anxious about her daughter leaving at such a young age, but Wendie had made up her mind to go. She made the flight across the Atlantic Ocean alone, and the following Monday she began her five-day trial at Clairefontaine with twenty-seven other girls. Only twelve girls were chosen from the group to join the academy, and unfortunately Wendie wasn’t one of them. Like so many of our trailblazers, she faced a setback that she had to overcome. In another interview she stated, ‘It was my chance but it wasn’t my destiny.’

Very quickly though, things began to fall into place for Wendie. Jocelyn Germé contacted a friend of his in the southern French city of Lyon. This friend approached the head coach of the city’s women’s team, Olympique Lyonnais Féminin, and asked him to give Wendie a trial. The coach, Faridi Benstili, agreed, and Wendie took the train down to Lyon to meet him. After watching Wendie train, the coach signed her almost immediately.

What attracted Wendie to join Lyon? ‘Particularly for me, it was the chairman at that time,’ Wendie replies, ‘because he respected both the men and the women.’ She also admired the mentality at Lyon, the desire ‘to improve, to stay the best team.’

Since Wendie joined Lyon the team have won fourteen league titles (a record number of times). They’ve won the Coupe de France Féminine ten times (another record), and as mentioned before, they’ve won the Champions League eight times (yes, you’ve guessed it, another record!)

So was Wendie’s professional career everything she dreamed of? Did

she miss Martinique at all? 'I didn't miss Martinique,' Wendie replies, 'because it was *my* decision to come here. Sometimes it's bad, sometimes it's good, but it's my responsibility because I took this decision.'

In 2013, Wendie was made captain of the Lyon team, a position she still holds to this day. 'I was young when the coach decided to make me the captain,' Wendie recalls, 'but I think mentally my spirit was good.' When the coach gave Wendie the captain's armband and told her that next year she would be leading the team, Wendie's reply was, 'Are you sure? Because we have a lot of experienced girls in the team, and I'm only young. It's a lot of responsibility.' The coach replied, 'I've decided to give it to you because you're a good person. You deserve it. You work well, and now you need to continue to develop.' Wendie bursts out laughing at this point and adds, 'Because I'm a little shy!'

This does seem a bit unbelievable as Wendie is such a bold, brave and confident player on the pitch. But she explains that she *was* a little shy when she was young, and being the team captain *did* help her overcome that, 'so now it's OK!'

Wendie has spent her whole career at Lyon. What does she think are the positives and negatives of playing for just one club? Wendie believes there are more positives than negatives. She thinks she's 'in the best place' for her. She spends her time playing with other excellent players, and the team has a winning mentality. Wendie feels that she's learned a lot at Lyon – 'It has been amazing for me.'

Wendie began playing for the national team very quickly after joining Lyon. The French women's team haven't won any major competitions yet, and Wendie believes that it's because 'when we play with the club, we work every day together. But with the national team, we sometimes have only ten days to prepare for two or three games.' But she enjoys playing for her country and says 'it gives her the chance to improve.'

Wendie has so many memories of playing for Lyon and for France. The best club moments for Wendie are when Lyon has won the league title, even though they've done it so many times! 'So many titles, so many memories,' Wendie remembers with a smile. 'It's not easy to

describe, because you need to live this.'

In her international career, Wendie has fond memories of the Women's World Cup in Canada in 2011. Although France didn't win the competition, Wendie says that, 'Canada was a good competition because no-one was expecting much from us and we overachieved.' Wendie says this was a great moment for the French team, because after the World Cup, they were treated with more respect – 'Other countries were saying, *OK, now we know how well the French can play.*' Although Wendie enjoyed taking part in the London Olympics in 2012, she was disappointed because she feels France should have won the women's competition because they dominated the games so much - 'It's most important to me to win a title with my country. It's a must.'

Wendie is still quite a young player, only in her early thirties, but is she already planning ahead for a future where she can no longer play football?

'Yeah, yeah, I know I need to finish one day,' Wendie says seriously. 'But for now I'm very focused on my role as a player as I still have a lot to give. I enjoy coaching and watch every game - men and women's. And I think I would like to stay close to the pitch.'

But does she think she'll still be playing when she's forty years old, like Cristiano Ronaldo?! Wendie laughs. 'Maybe, I don't know,' she replies. 'It depends on your energy and your body.'

Some ex-players make the move into the media, is that something that interests Wendie? Wendie says not



yet, maybe later, but she does think it's important that players are involved in the media 'because it's important to have good analysis, to give good feedback.'

When Wendie's asked if, after all these years, she still feels excited at the beginning of a new season, she responds very enthusiastically, 'Yeah, yeah, yeah! I am excited because every year we work towards the same objective, you know, and when you start a season, it's not the same as last season. You need to do more! Every year it's like this – we have to prepare well, eat well, sleep well, stay focused and professional.'

Wendie advises girls who want a career in football to 'Believe. Believe in yourself. Believe in your capacity to succeed. Because if you don't believe, I can encourage you, but I can't believe in your place.' Wendie goes on to add that, 'You need to be able to stay focused, have a good mentality on and off the pitch and look after your body. And yeah, enjoy it!'

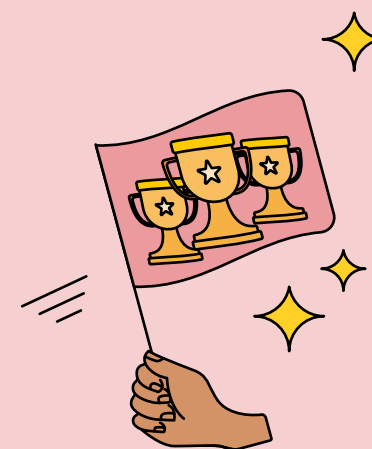
Wendie took a huge risk when she left Martinique, her home, at just sixteen years old. She suffered a knockback when she didn't make it in the Clairefontaine academy, but just take a look at what she's achieved since – 'that's a lot of achievement!' as Wendie puts it.

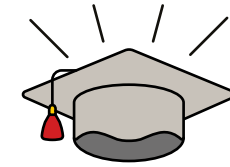
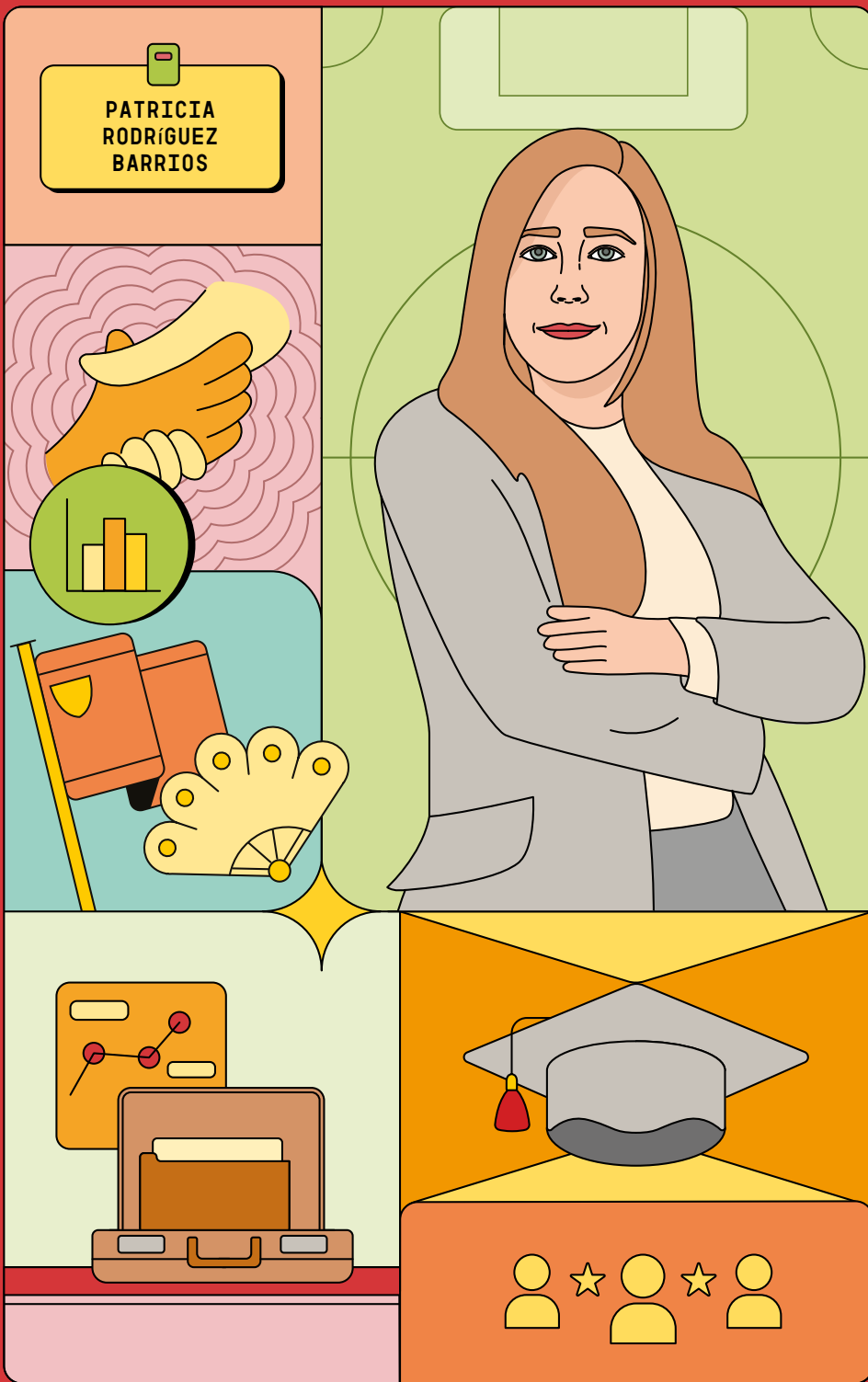
Wendie followed her own advice by believing in herself, staying focused and never giving up. And here she is today, one of the most outstanding football players in the world and a role model for millions of people. She took risks, faced challenges and never stopped believing that she could follow her dream.

Won't it be fascinating to see what she does next?

HENDIE RENARD'S PLAY

**FOLLOW
YOUR
DREAM**





PATRICIA RODRÍGUEZ BARRIOS

Patricia Rodríguez Barrios is an absolute trailblazer of a woman, the first female in the history of Spanish football to hold the position of Managing Director of a men's La Liga club. She's also worked for other Spanish football clubs, as well as serving as Vice-President of La Liga.

When asked about her life now and what activities she's involved in on a daily basis, Patricia cheerfully reels off a very long list! For one thing, she runs her own sports management company that helps football clubs develop financial, sustainable and strategic plans. Patricia also works with basketball teams and tennis clubs - 'So I'm working in the three biggest sports in Spain.'

Patricia is also working with football clubs in South America. She's a mentor for start-up businesses, helping them to find investors and obtain funds to develop their companies. As well as all of the above, she also teaches an MBA (Master of Business Administration) at La Liga's Business School. She is an incredibly busy woman who obviously loves her work, and it's fascinating to look back at her life and see how it all began.

So was Patricia a football fan when she was young? She laughs and says no, because her passion back then was swimming. She only grew to love football when she started working in the industry.

When Patricia was a child, she used to train with her swimming team every day, and at weekends, they took part in competitions.

'I loved swimming,' Patricia explains, 'and I think it was key in my childhood and for my future, because I'm a very disciplined person.'

A big part of Patricia's career as an adult involves finance. So was she good at maths at school? Patricia says, yes, she was a good student – 'I liked to go to school, and I like to learn new things.' You'll probably notice that many of the amazing women in this book all say that they love to learn, that they're always looking to improve themselves.



Patricia knew very early on that, when she finished school, she would choose to follow a career in business administration. Her parents ran a company, and Patricia says it was very common for her to visit them after school, before going to the swimming-pool, and watching them working. She loved it, and she never felt that her parents were 'always busy, always working. No, no, for me it was something I liked!' Because of her parents' example, Patricia wanted to be 'involved in business, managing a company, things that I'm involved in now.'

Patricia acknowledges that her parents were very supportive and helped her a lot, 'because they always gave me the confidence to choose my own career and my own life. I think that's quite key, because they never put barriers in my way. So the confidence they gave me, I think it was very important to shape me into a responsible and ambitious person.'

So after school, Patricia went on to study business administration at the University of Duesto. Whilst there, she decided to specialise in finance. There were opportunities to specialise in other areas like strategy or marketing, but Patricia thought that finance was the most difficult one (we know she likes a challenge!).

At university, Patricia became involved with the junior enterprise movement. This is a not-for-profit company set up and run by students in universities and business schools. While completing their

studies, the students learn how to run a company by taking part in real-life projects with actual businesses. Patricia was president of the junior enterprise company at her university during her last year there. 'Every week we had the management committee meeting,' Patricia explains. 'We also had some clients, like the local bank! They asked us to do some work with market studies, that they needed.'

Patricia not only obtained her degree in business administration, she also went on to earn a Master's in International Management from the ISC Business School in Paris, a top French educational institution. Afterwards, she began working for PwCs, one of the Big Four accountancy firms in the world. Patricia stayed at PwC for around nine years. And then she saw an opportunity to apply her expertise in financial management to a football club.

A small club called SD Eibar had just won promotion from the second division to the top Spanish division, La Liga. They had begun to advertise for a Finance Manager, which Patricia says was definitely not a common thing in the Spanish sporting world.

'I was in the office at PwC,' she explains, 'and a colleague of mine, one of my friends from university, he found the job advert and sent it to me. He told me that this is something strange and different, and that I would like it.'

Patricia was intrigued and decided to apply for the job. 'OK, I don't like football, I'm not passionate about football, but it's true that this is strange. This is different.' Patricia already knew something about La Liga because they were a client of PwC's. She was also aware that the football world in Spain was changing rapidly. 'Until 2013, the football industry in Spain was a little bit crazy!' Patricia says. 'Many clubs were bankrupt, and they owed money to the tax authorities and to the players. I didn't want to join that kind of industry, but I knew that things were changing.'

Patricia thought she probably wouldn't get the Finance Manager job at Eibar because she was a woman. However, she was successful, and she was offered the post! Patricia was pleased, but it soon became apparent that working for Eibar football club was going to be very different from working for PwC.

'My first day at Eibar was very strange,' Patricia remembers, 'because I came from a big multi-national company like PwC, where if I had a problem, I could call someone to solve that problem. But Eibar was very small. There was only one guy in charge of all the administration at the club.'

Eibar's board of directors moved quickly to hire more professional people to run the business side of the club. Then, two years after joining Eibar, Patricia was appointed Managing Director. This created a huge media storm, not just in Spain but right across the world, because Patricia was the first-ever woman to hold this position in La Liga. She was widely recognised as the trailblazer that she was, but Patricia could see that there was much to be done at Eibar – 'We decided to prepare a strategic plan for the next three or four years in which we had plans for projects like new facilities in the stadium and also a sports city, a place where the club's teams could train.' At that time, Eibar was the only club in the first division that didn't have their own training ground. Patricia was instrumental in Eibar's internationalisation process to help them grow and even went as far as building connections in Japan for the club.

During her time at Eibar, Patricia became a football fan! 'When I was in Eibar, I learned to love football,' she says. She adds that it was a little difficult moving from a huge company like PwC, 'which has a very clear structure', to a football club. 'It was quite difficult to understand the passion of the fans, and also the way the players think,' Patricia admits, 'because the players are the base of the pyramid I had in Eibar, but they are actually key to the club.'

Patricia talks about 'learning a lot' from other people at the club, especially those who worked directly with the players. She says, she was 'learning and reading and listening to as much information as possible.' Many of the other women in the book also mention the importance of being willing to learn, and continuing to be open to learning and improving, even when they've reached the top of their profession. Patricia is very honest about the difficulties she faced moving from one work environment to another.

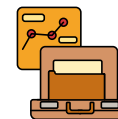
After five years at Eibar, Patricia felt that the main goals had been

achieved. She describes herself as 'a very ambitious person', and she wanted to seek out new challenges. So Patricia left Eibar in 2019 and moved to Elche, a second division club in the Spanish region of Alicante.

Things at Elche were quite complicated. 'The club were in a bankruptcy situation,' Patricia says. 'They had no money. When I arrived in Elche, the owner of the club told me he had no money to pay the players' salaries!'

After a couple of years at Elche, during which the club won promotion to La Liga, it was time for Patricia to move on again. In 2021 she took up the post of Chief Executive Officer at Granada, another football club for a while. Now she is busy with all the different projects that were mentioned at the beginning.

So why does Patricia think she's managed to achieve such great success? What's her secret? 'I never give up, and I try, I try always,' Patricia replies. 'I always prefer to try something. If something doesn't work, OK, there is another plan, and we can change it.' Patricia is very passionate about her career – 'I love my work! I think that's key, because when you like something, it's easier to work hard and learn.' Patricia also believes that having self-confidence is important because 'being a woman in this industry is not always easy because you are the different one.' During her working life, she has very often been the only woman at the top level. Patricia mentions a photo-shoot in which all the guys were wearing black jackets, and she was wearing a white one!



In 2019 Patricia was named one of the hundred most influential women in Spain in the fields of culture, leisure and sport. But what are some of her other career highlights?

Patricia says that one of the most important moments in her career was her decision to leave PwC 'where I was quite comfortable', and move to Eibar. She took a big risk when she did so, because her contract at Eibar was only for one year - 'People thought that Eibar would only be playing in the first division for one year!' Patricia explains, as it was likely the newly-promoted club would be relegated in their first season. She remarks that some people thought she was 'crazy' to leave her long-term career for 'this very risky adventure!'

Patricia also chooses the moment she moved from Finance Manager to Managing Director at Eibar as one of her career highlights. However, she laughs as she goes on to add, 'During the first minute, I was happy! But the second minute, I was thinking that the club will be playing in the second division next season, and I will be responsible for this disaster at the club!' Patricia realised that she needed to improve her self-confidence, and she began working with a coach to achieve this. Again, this is a great example of our successful trailblazers always wanting to do better and improve themselves.

Spain are the current Women's World Cup holders, and Patricia thinks the women's game can grow a lot bigger - 'But we need our time on TV and in the newspapers.' She emphasises that there's a real need for investment in order to create a sustainable future for women's football.

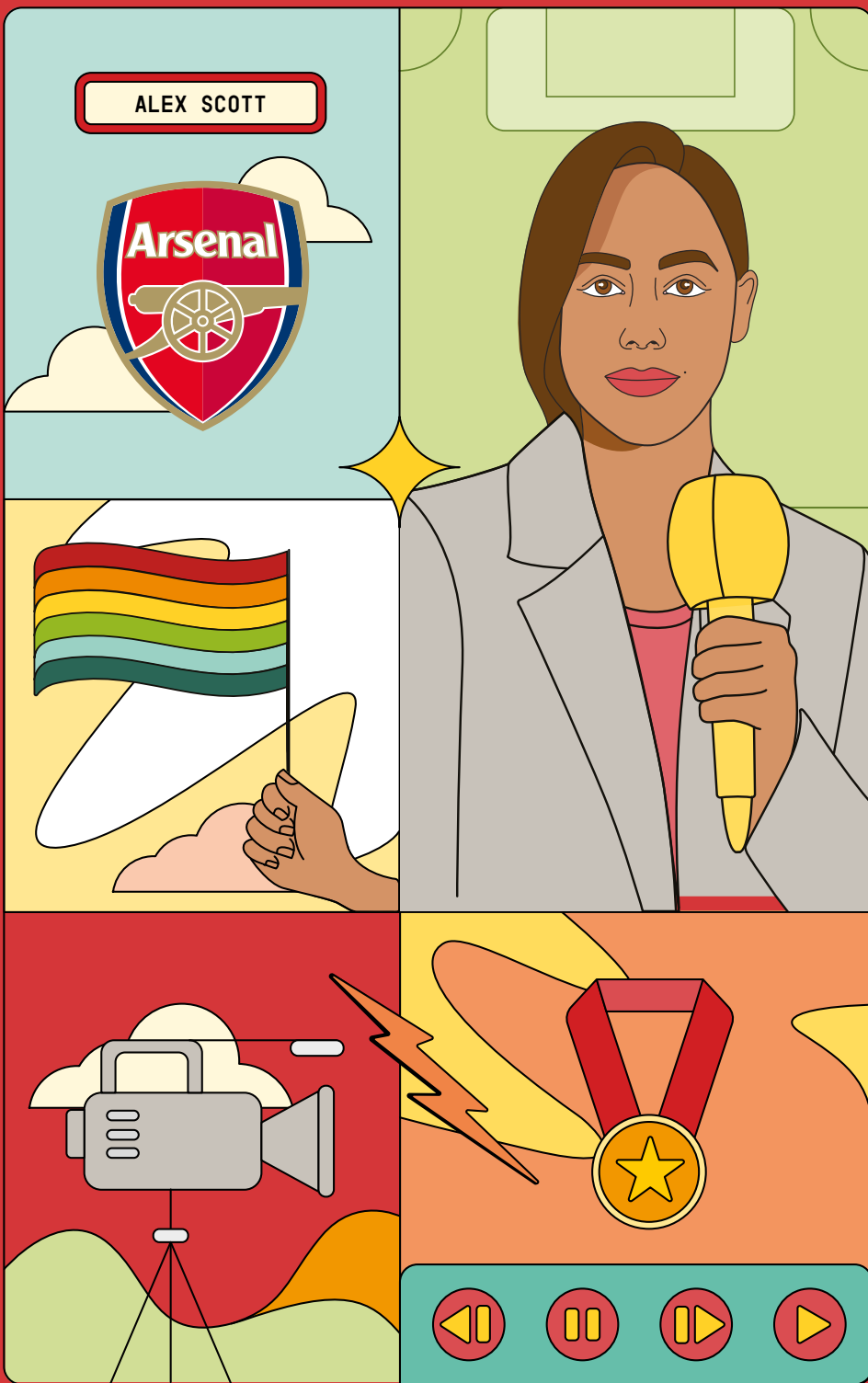
And what advice would one of the most successful women in sports management give to girls who'd like to follow her career path?

'Always try and never give up,' Patricia advises. 'When I was at university, there were not many specialist courses in sports management, but now there are many opportunities. Try to learn as much as possible. And always face your problems with responsibility and ambition!'

PATRICIA RODRÍGUEZ BARRIOS'S PLAY

RUN
TOWARDS
YOUR
GOALS





ALEX SCOTT

Alex Scott, former Arsenal player and England international, is one of the most respected and well-known faces in British TV sports programming. After a distinguished career for both club and country, she moved into broadcasting and blazed a fantastic trail for other women to follow in her footsteps. She was the first female football analyst to work on a World Cup for the BBC in 2018, and she was also the first female football expert to appear on Sky Sports when she joined the *Super Sunday* programme. Alex is supremely professional in everything she does, but she's also charming, funny and charismatic, whether she's talking about her football or her TV career.

Alex's earliest football memory is of playing the game on her housing estate in Poplar, East London. At the end of the estate, there was 'a concrete football cage, and that's where we used to go to play football,' she explains. 'That little football cage was absolutely everything,' Alex recalls fondly, 'just playing football and competing for your place in that cage.'

Alex's talent for football was spotted early. She was signed by Arsenal when she was just eight years old! So how did that come about?

Alex explains that the youth workers where she lived would organise community events. One of them was a football tournament just around the corner from where Alex lived, and her brother got a five-a-side team together to take part. When one of his friends dropped out, 'then he was like, 'Come on, Alex, you can come and play

in the tournament with me.”

So Alex did, and her football skills caught the eye of one of the referees. He suggested that she go down to Arsenal because they had a women’s team. Alex’s reply was ‘No, I’m not bothered,’ because she didn’t want to miss out on playing football with the boys! However, the referee was insistent that she ask her mum, and one of the youth workers then took Alex to Arsenal. They signed her straightaway.



Alex began training twice a week at Arsenal and played with others her own age, but if you were good enough – and Alex was – then you’d be playing with the older teams occasionally, too.

Alex didn’t support a particular team back then, although when the World Cups were on, she loved Brazil and Holland, and she remembers having their bright kits. ‘But when I signed for Arsenal, they obviously became my team and my family,’ Alex says with a smile.

Born in 1984, Alex was growing up at a time when women’s football had a lower profile than it does now. The players were amateurs, which meant they didn’t get paid. ‘When you played football back then, you weren’t thinking about a career or earning money,’ she says, ‘It was a passion and you absolutely loved it, and no matter what, you’d get by, making ends meet in other ways.’

As Alex grew older, she took on different jobs to support herself. One of them was in the Arsenal laundry, washing the men’s kit! A woman making a good living at football just wasn’t a thing back then – ‘So I was always trying to find a job that still allowed me to concentrate on playing football.’

Alex used to watch the men playing in the World Cup and the Euros and dream of doing the same. ‘Just imagine if you were there playing in that stadium with sixty thousand people cheering you on! Imagine that happening one day!’ And when it did happen for her,

when she became fully professional, playing in World Cups and the Euros in big stadiums, ‘then the dream and *pinch me* moments came true!’

Alex has many golden memories of playing for Arsenal Women. She started with the reserves in 2001 and then had a spell playing for Birmingham. But she returned to Arsenal in 2005 and was there until 2018 when she retired, apart from another break when she played in the USA from 2009 to 2011. Alex, an attacking right back, was part of the Arsenal team that had an astonishing record of one hundred and eight league games without defeat between 2003 and 2009. ‘Everyone always goes on about the men, the Invincibles,’ Alex points out, referring to the Arsenal men’s team who ended the 2003-4 season without a single defeat. ‘But we also did it!’ Another highlight for Alex was when her team completed the quadruple in 2007, adding the UEFA Champions League to their haul of three domestic trophies – the league title, the FA Cup and the League Cup, an outstanding achievement. No other British women’s team has won the UEFA Champions League before or since.’

Alex also thinks the 2016 FA Cup final was one of her most memorable moments at Arsenal because ‘it was the first time I’d played at Wembley in my Arsenal colours.’ Arsenal beat Chelsea 1-0, and as captain, Alex was the one who lifted the trophy.

Alex believes that the Arsenal team were leaders in the women’s game right from the start. ‘The team’s first manager, Vic Akers, was very involved with the men’s team,’ Alex explained, ‘so he was already in that professional environment, and he knew how you had to act.’ Although the women’s team were not professionals yet, ‘the manager was making us professional in terms of our training,’ Alex says. ‘I think we were the first women’s team to travel on the men’s bus! So we looked professional.’

Alex calls these small steps forward ‘building blocks’, things that were slowly being put in place to raise the status of the women’s game. While the situation was getting better, there was still room for improvement – Alex remembers the women having to wait until everyone had left the ground before they could start training.

Apart from Arsenal, Alex also had a fantastic career with England,

eventually making over one hundred and forty appearances for her country. At the time of her retirement from international football in 2017, she was the second most-capped female player. Alex selects the 2007 World Cup as a particular highlight of her international career. It was the first time the England team had qualified for around twelve years, so it was an historic achievement. The then England coach, Hope Powell, began pushing for more funding so that the team could compete with top countries like Germany and the United States. 'So I think that moment changed everything for women's football and the Lionesses,' Alex says reflectively. 'We turned semi-professional and we knew that being in those bigger tournaments meant the effect would filter down to the club system so you'd have more investment.'

After the World Cup, the Lionesses qualified for the 2009 Euros, reaching the final and finishing as runners-up to Germany. Then, in 2015 the England team finished in third place in the Euros. Alex again calls all these things the building blocks to success – 'Every time we were doing things as a national team, we were getting more investment, more media attention.'

In 2009, Alex left Arsenal for a new challenge across the Atlantic Ocean with American club the Boston Breakers. It was a significant moment for Alex. She was stunned by the difference between playing in the UK and playing in the States. At home, she was a semi-professional, but in America – 'I could fully concentrate on being the best athlete I could be, because I was in a professional environment.' Women's football in the USA, Alex says, was 'miles ahead.' She adds, 'Everything they did, it was all about winning, and they were unapologetic and it wasn't in an arrogant way, but it rubs off.'

When Alex returned home to the UK, she rejoined Arsenal, but she found playing football in the English Women's Super League somewhat frustrating after experiencing the professional standards of the USA. 'So then I was like, well, what does my future look like?' Alex explains. 'I need to have something that gives me a passion and drive.'

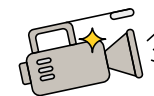
At the time Hope Powell was trying to encourage more women into coaching and managerial roles, but Alex knew this wasn't for her

- 'So I was, like, right, I'll go and get a degree whilst playing for Arsenal!'

Alex's drive and her ability to take calculated risks and make difficult decisions are typical of our trailblazers, and so was her desire to keep on learning and improving. She studied for a degree in Professional Sports Writing and Broadcasting with the University of Staffordshire. 'So I love having conversations. I love learning about people. And I was also frustrated that, when I'm watching a sport I love, why are there no women across it? That's what I want to do, but I'm going to have to do it the right way.' Alex believed the right way for her was to go and study for a degree, so that no-one could ever say that a position in broadcasting had been handed to her for any reason other than sheer merit.

Perhaps not even Alex realised just how successful she was going to be, though! In 2018, there was a storm of media attention when the BBC offered Alex the role of a Football Analyst for the men's World Cup in Russia. Suddenly her name was everywhere, and everyone knew who she was. And yet, Alex points out, she'd already been working in the media doing work placements as part of her degree. She'd had a football show on London Live - 'on a station that no-one watched!' – and she'd already done some things for the BBC. 'So, just like in football, it was building blocks,' Alex points out. 'I was banking all this experience.'

This was just the beginning of Alex's fantastic list of achievement 'firsts'. She's now a respected football



analyst who's worked across a wide range of sports programming – men's football, women's football, the Olympics, the BBC Sports Personality of the Year. In 2021 she began presenting 'Football Focus', the BBC's long-running Saturday lunchtime football show, again the first woman ever to do so. She mentions that one of the highlights of her TV career so far was watching the Lionesses win the Euros in 2022.

However, Alex has also worked extensively in TV programmes that aren't sport-related. She's an excellent presenter, and she's worked on *The One Show* and *Children in Need*. She's also presented a quiz show and competed in *Strictly Come Dancing*, among other things! Would she like to do more of this? 'Sport is obviously my bread and butter,' Alex says. 'It's what I've known my whole life. But stepping into the other shows challenges me in different ways and allows me to step out of my comfort zone. You never stop learning as a human.'

Alex is a role model for thousands of people, especially girls, but she likes 'to flip that term' and call herself a 'real model'. 'When we talk about 'role models', it's like everyone's perfect,' Alex says with a smile. 'I'm a 'real model'. This is me. I'll talk about the ups and downs, and I won't shy away from the struggles that have helped me to be me because that's the reality.'

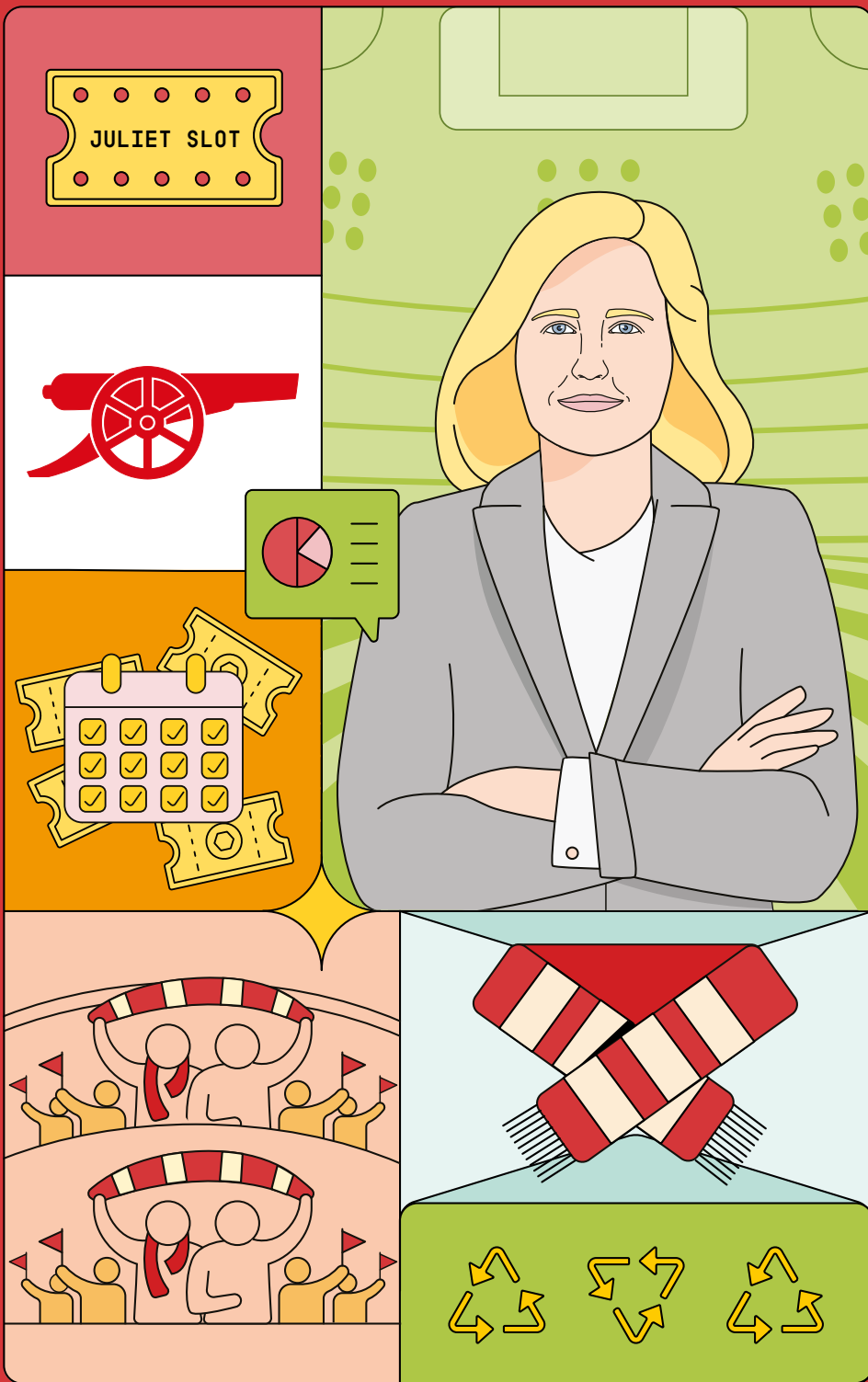
And finally, what advice would Alex give to girls who'd love to follow in her footsteps? 'Believe in yourself,' she tells them. 'Believe that you are good enough, and that there's a space for you. You don't have to try to be something you're not. Always be your authentic self. We're not all meant to be the same.'

And it's clear that we're going to see this trailblazing, inspirational and straight-talking woman on our TV screens for many years to come.

ALEX SCOTT'S PLAY

BE YOUR AUTHENTIC SELF





JULIET SLOT

Those of us who've never worked for a football club have very little idea of the immense amount of effort it takes behind the scenes to keep the club running smoothly. There are so many different professional roles within the world of football that are essential to a team's success, apart from the ones we always hear about – players, coaches, managers and so on. So it was incredibly exciting to discover more about this with the help of Juliet Slot, the Chief Commercial Officer at Arsenal Football Club. Juliet is energetic, chatty, animated and very good-humoured as she explains her role to someone who knows nothing about it!

Juliet says that she's responsible for the key revenue streams of the club (that's the money the club makes), excluding broadcast rights and player sales. Her task is to build the Arsenal brand and to connect with the supporters.' Juliet is also responsible for creating partnerships with club sponsors such as Mastercard, as well as all the marketing content for retail, digital channels and social media, amongst others – 'so, all the basic places where we can engage and touch our supporters, whether it's physical in the stadium or digital globally.'

Sounds absolutely fascinating, right? Juliet has been at Arsenal for around three years, but she's spent almost her whole career working in the sports industry for some of the biggest and best-known sporting brands in the world. So was she sporty when growing up? Juliet says she did a sport called lacrosse at school, and then casually goes on to mention that she played lacrosse at international

level for the England Under-18 and Under-21 teams, and she was the captain of the U21's!

'I came from a family that followed a lot of sport,' Juliet explains. 'Family viewing was a famous BBC sports programme called *Grandstand*, every Saturday afternoon.'

However, the one sport Juliet *wasn't* interested in back then was football! She tells the story of how, as an eighteen-year-old, a friend took her to watch a game at Chelsea. 'He was determined to make me a football supporter,' Juliet says with a smile. 'He couldn't believe I wasn't! And I actually didn't enjoy it very much. Back in 1986, the football world was very different.'



Juliet mentions that she was very good at history and geography at school, but not so good at the sciences. And for someone who's now dealing with huge budgets at Arsenal, she admits she was never particularly good at maths either. However, Juliet explains, 'I don't need A-level maths to do what I do. I need to be able to do percentages and adding up in my head, but nothing very complicated!'

Juliet went to the University of Bristol to study history. That might seem a strange background for someone who ended up working with sales and figures, but Juliet thinks that, 'all university degrees will give you a skill you can use in the workplace.' She's clear that, although she loved sport, she'd 'never considered having a career in sport until I went to university. And I'll be honest with you, I fell into it by chance!'

At the end of her three years at university, Juliet still didn't really know what career path she should take. However, she wanted to stay on at the university because her boyfriend still had another year of his course to complete! So Juliet decided to go for a position as President of the Athletic Union. She'd played sport all through her time at the university, and she had opinions about how things could be

improved. She'd seen first-hand the problems caused by lack of funding like not having the money for a minibus to take a team to an away game.

So Juliet stood for election to the Athletic Union with a very snappy slogan, *Don't forget, vote Juliet!* When the students voted, Juliet won by a landslide, and so she suddenly found herself running the sports side of university life for a year. 'And what I really enjoyed wasn't the admin. It was trying to find sponsors to raise money for the big events we held.'

Juliet went out and managed to get Deloitte, one of the so-called Big Four accountancy companies in the world, to sponsor the university half-marathon – 'The process of finding them, having a meeting, making a presentation for them, I really enjoyed. And so I thought, I really want to work in the sports industry on the business side.'

When Juliet left university in 1991, there was a recession, and she found it difficult to find a graduate job. But she has a very obvious 'can-do' attitude, and she's pretty much living proof of the phrase *You make your own luck!* So she set herself the challenge to think of ways she could make herself more employable.

Juliet decided to go and live in France for a while to improve her French. She taught English there to support herself, but at the same time, she was writing to sports marketing agencies in the UK, offering to work for them for free. One of the agencies agreed that, while Juliet was in France, she could work on a project for them.

When Juliet came back to the UK, she asked the agency for a job, but they had no jobs available except for a secretarial post. Now, it just so happened that Juliet's father had suggested that she take a secretarial course before she went to university – and Juliet had done so! She took the job, but had no intention of staying a secretary for very long. 'My first bit of advice is get yourself on the ladder,' Juliet says firmly, 'because when you're in a company, then you can see the opportunities.'

Very soon, Juliet was offering to take on more work. She worked late, she was always helpful and available. And it paid off. The agency allowed her to work on a sales pitch, and they told her that if they won, then Juliet would be promoted to the position of Account

Executive. You can probably guess what happened! They *did* win, and Juliet found herself working for Barilla Pasta, who sponsored marathons around Europe.

Juliet had to learn on the job. 'If you can't do something, you can learn,' she points out wisely. 'It doesn't matter if you're not perfect. Just be a hard worker, and *don't be afraid to fail*.'

After a couple of years, Juliet happened to meet the Marketing Director of Adidas and was offered a job in Germany. She calls this her 'biggest, luckiest break'. She left only because she'd met her husband, a sports journalist, and she wanted to move back to the UK and start a family. Juliet was very proactive, as she's always been in her career, and she began looking around for her next job and talking to as many people as she could. One of these people happened to be on the board of Fulham FC. Juliet told him, 'You know, I think I want to get into football.'

Six weeks after having her first child, Juliet got a call from the General Manager at Fulham, who interviewed her and offered her a marketing post at the club. 'He said, 'Let's give you a go!'' Juliet recalls, and mentions that she's had a couple of experiences like that, where someone 'gave her a go', gave her a chance to try something new and prove herself. Remember what she said earlier? Don't be afraid to fail.

However, Juliet has faced challenges in her life and has had to make difficult decisions just as we all have. She loved being at Fulham, where she learned how to market a football club as a brand. And during her five years there, she became a football fan! But by this stage, Juliet had three children, and she decided she was ready for change. Again, she 'made her own luck' by deciding she wanted to be involved in London's bid to host the Olympic Games in 2012. That was her next job, and she was thrilled when London won the bid – 'probably one of my career highlights.' Through that job, Juliet then found her next role, as a Managing Director at Haymarket Publishing.

After two and a half years, Juliet left because, as she says, 'I missed sports. I really wanted to get back into sports.' She joined a sports agency for a while, working with global brands before

receiving a call from Ascot Racecourse. They were looking for a Commercial Director.

Juliet loved horses but she knew nothing about horse-racing! After several interviews, she was offered the job, but on the morning of her first day, she was so nervous, she told her husband she didn't think she could do it. 'And he's, like going, 'Yes, you can. You've always managed to listen and learn.'

Juliet went to work that first day after all. She stayed at Ascot for eight years and loved it. After leaving, she took a little time out, before getting the call from Arsenal. 'Arsenal was the one club I've always admired,' Juliet explains. 'The club has always been a trailblazer, not just in men's football, but in women's too. They were one of the first clubs to create a women's team.'

One of Juliet's passions is the growth of women's football. Arsenal Women remains one of the most successful teams in the world. The team has its roots in Arsenal in the Community, and started as dedicated girls-only football sessions run by the community team at the old JVC Centre near their old stadium, Highbury.

Arsenal Women was established in 1987 by Vic Akers, who was the men's kit manager and had a strong focus on equal opportunity and building a sense of community. Akers became Arsenal's first and longest-serving manager, leading them to win their first ever trophy, the Premier League Cup in 1992. This was followed by massive success at home and abroad, before Vic Akers left in 2009.

Arsenal have helped to revolutionise the world of



women's football. The club hold the records for all the domestic competitions, and are the only English club who've won the UEFA Women's Champions' League. Oh, and they also went one hundred and eight consecutive league games without defeat from October 2003 to March 2009!

Juliet is a huge supporter of women's football, but she thinks that 'women's football has a long way to go to get as big as the men's'.

The super-successful Arsenal women's team is attracting a whole new audience, Juliet says. Juliet's team has found a formula that works and brings more supporters to the Emirates on a regular basis to support the sustainable growth of the game. This is reflected in her pride of selling out the Emirates on three separate occasions last season.

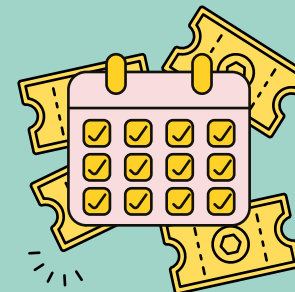
Arsenal Women is a brilliant platform for change, and Juliet says the players are great mouthpieces for campaigns they feel passionately about, with Juliet particularly proud about a recent campaign launched with Persil to destigmatise periods around sport, and the work the team has done with partner Mastercard to encourage girls into STEM subjects.

Juliet's advice to girls who want to build a career in sports is to work in industries they're passionate about. 'A football club is like a world,' she points out. 'We have retail, ticket sales, marketing, legal and accounting departments, and more. We use every single different type of skill in our business.' She tells me that she's just promoted a member of her team who started off as a fourteen-year-old at Arsenal selling programmes to Head of Sales.

'Network, dream big and don't think you can't have a career and a family because you absolutely can!' Juliet adds emphatically. And then, at the end of the interview, she dashes off to watch the Champions League quarter-final leg between the Arsenal Women and Real Madrid. What an amazing and inspirational woman.

JULIET SLOT'S PLAY

DON'T BE
AFRAID
TO FAIL





IMKE WÜBBENHORST

Imke Wübbenhorst's first football memory is a very sweet one. She was about to play in a football tournament and was sitting on the grass with her mum. Her mother found a four-leaf clover and popped it inside Imke's shoe for good luck!

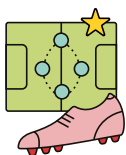
Imke, who was born in 1988 in Aurich, Germany, is a former footballer, now a coach. She created a media stir when she became the first-ever woman to coach one of the men's teams in Germany's five top leagues, which definitely gives her trailblazer status.

Growing up, Imke and her brother played in the same mixed team. 'We were very young,' Imke says. She's right - she was four years old, and her brother was six! 'I started soccer because my brother played, my mother played and my dad was a coach, so I had no chance to do anything else!'

Imke, her mother and brother all played at the same club in one of the lower divisions. Imke played with the boys and then, later, with the women's team. In fact, she played with both her brother *and* her mum! As a family, they watched a lot of football on TV. 'We used to watch the sports show every Saturday evening,' Imke explains, 'and we didn't want to know the results before we watched it, so everyone would say, *No, no, don't say anything!*'

When Imke is asked when she realised she was good at football, she gives a very thoughtful reply - 'I don't think I was the talented one. I was the one that worked hard and had a good mentality. I think,

yes, I was talented because I played with boys who were one or two years older than me, and I handled it well. But I didn't have the technical skills in the beginning.' Imke goes on to say that she practised her football skills constantly, watching other players and how they moved and the way they behaved on the pitch. She adds that, 'in professional soccer, there are a lot of talented people, but someone who's really focused on their goals can make it, even if they haven't the best talent.'



Imke was determined to improve her football skills, but says her mum was keen for her to be a professional horse rider! The family had horses at home, and Imke received a pony for her birthday and then, later on, a bigger horse. But she didn't really enjoy horse-riding lessons. She was much happier playing a team sport like football – 'I always preferred doing something with someone instead of with my horse.'

Imke continued to play football, moving from the junior to the senior level. But she knew very early on that she wanted to be a coach. 'I wanted to stay on the pitch the whole day, in the sun, even in the rain!' She started her training to be a coach at eighteen years old, studying for the prestigious UEFA Pro Licence – the highest-level coach you can reach in football. 'You need time for doing the licence,' Imke explains, 'And you need money. I sold off pretty much everything I owned to do my coaching badge.'

Imke was so determined to make the grade, that even her tables, chairs and bed were all sold to fund her coaching career. She could not afford an apartment and instead stayed with friends with nothing but her clothes whilst studying for her UEFA Pro Licence.

Imke spent fifteen years playing at senior level, many of them at the club BV Cloppenburg. One of the highlights of her club career was when the Cloppenburg women's team achieved promotion from the

second division to the first. She was also playing for the German national team, beginning with the Under-17 team and going on to win the Under-19 European Championship twice. Some of her proudest moments on the pitch.

When Imke was twenty-six years old, she decided to spend a year in Spain playing for the club Sporting Huelva. She saw this as a way to complete her career – 'I wanted to find out what it's like to be in another country and be a professional there because when I'm a coach, I want to know how players feel when they're in a different country and they don't speak the language!'

Imke's experience playing in Spain gave her a unique insight for when she later became a coach. She found it very difficult as she didn't speak Spanish, 'and then they only train in the evenings because it's so hot!' She missed her friends and her busy life in Germany – 'I didn't know what to do with myself the whole day!' Afterwards, Imke returned to Cloppenburg where she continued to play for the women's team.

Then the team coach left the position, and Imke was asked if she would take over. 'So, I said,' OK, that's a very big chance! I'm so young, only twenty-seven, to be a coach in the second division!' It was an opportunity Imke couldn't turn down.

But an even bigger chance came along when Imke was offered the position of coach to the Cloppenburg men's team, who were in the men's fifth division. She became the first female coach of a German's men's team at this level, and this inevitably attracted a great deal of media attention. Imke continued to make headlines when she moved to fourth division Sportfreunde Lotte to coach the men's team (she was only the second woman to coach at this level), and then to third division FC Viktoria Köln as assistant coach to the men's team. She's currently coach of the women's team at the Young Boys club based in Bern, Switzerland.

So what attracted Imke to coaching, and why did she think she'd be a good coach? 'I think when you play at the highest level, you see a lot of coaches,' Imke says, 'and you really know what you *don't* want.' She thinks it's very important to be honest with her players. As she says, though, it's very tough being honest with someone who's doing

something they love, and then you have to tell them they're not getting a new contract with the club, or they're not in the starting eleven. 'But I think you need to be honest to give them a good possibility to improve.'

Imke says she treats all her players fairly, whether they are playing, injured or sitting on the bench, 'because they need to feel comfortable to be good players.' She always talks to them, asking if everything is OK – 'I care a lot for them, and I want to have a lot of fun with them because I think fun is the biggest power we need to use in playing soccer!' Imke smiles and explains that she makes a lot of jokes during training sessions – 'jokes about myself, jokes about the players. We laugh about a lot of things, but we also know when it's time to be serious.'

Imke thinks her experience as a player is incredibly helpful in her role as a coach – 'At some points, it's very important to think as a player,' she says, 'because you know how they're feeling in the moment.' She explains that she's just been talking to one of her goalkeepers who used to be the club's number one goalie, but after suffering an injury, she's no longer first choice. 'I had to tell her, look, it will be an important game for us tomorrow, and you're not even in the squad,' Imke says, adding that, 'Because I used to be a player, I know how she feels, and so I can handle the situation better, I think.'

Imke's experience in football is extensive. She's played in teams with boys, and she's coached male teams. She's played in women's teams, and she's coached women's teams. She's done it all! And over the years, she's seen how women's football has changed in Germany.

The history of women's football in Germany has very much followed the pattern of other countries like England and Italy. Women who wanted to play football were sternly discouraged – it was definitely considered a bad thing! In 1955, the German football association, the DFB, banned its clubs from getting involved in women's football. It was declared that women were too 'frail' to play football, and they would only injure themselves! The ban was finally lifted in 1970.

Imke thinks that the ban delayed the progress of women's football, which means it's now playing catch-up with the men's game. She

suggests handling women's football like a new business in order to grow its potential. Like others have already said in different parts of the book, women's football needs sponsorship, investment and media attention.

As a coach, Imke also wants her players 'to have other things that make them happy, when soccer is not good.' She feels that it's important for players to have a life outside football, and she's following her own advice because she's just had a baby herself! Imke is now back at work at Young Boys club, with her mum helping to care for Imke's new son, Bendt. 'I think if players are just playing soccer, that is good, on the one hand, because they can focus. But I think it's good to have more roles in your life!'

Imke believes it's possible for a player to struggle if they concentrate on football to the exclusion of everything else – 'And that's why I really like it that my players are doing other things, they have other things that make them happy and so their resilience is better.' Imke firmly believes that players should not live in a 'soccer bubble'.

Does Imke find any differences between coaching men and coaching women? Yes, she does! 'If you have to criticise a man, you need to take care,' Imke says with a smile, 'you can't do it in front of the whole team because the man can't handle it very well. He gets angry.' With the women, it's different. 'If you criticise a girl in front of the team, they think they are not good enough, and their self-confidence goes down.'

Like many of our other trailblazers, Imke has experienced a good deal of sexism in her chosen career.



'I'm used to it,' she says, rolling her eyes. She explains that it doesn't bother her so much if it comes from the fans, the supporters, but if it's someone at the club, 'then I can't say it doesn't hurt.' She will challenge the person who made the sexist remark, often responding with a joke, but like other women in the book, she finds the constant need to prove herself very tiresome. She's sometimes forced to explain football tactics to a man, who's more ignorant of the game than she is, just to show she knows what she's talking about.

But this season, Imke's Young Boys team has qualified for the Europa Cup for the first time in her history as a coach, showing that her tactics are not only effective but successful.

Imke has plenty of advice for girls who want a playing or a coaching career, or both, as she herself has done. 'I think you need to choose a goal,' she says, 'and you need to stick to your goal, unless you're not happy. And then you need to be honest with yourself and say, *I can't do this anymore because I'm not happy*. Maybe then you need to change your goal, but don't make yourself unhappy just to prove something to yourself or to others, because the most important thing is to have a good life.' Very wise words!

IMKE HÜBBENHORST'S PLAY

★
**BE HONEST
WITH
YOURSELF**



