

Bending It in the U.K.

Interview with Anjana Gadgil

10 April 2003 | **Anjana Gadgil**, who writes on women's football for *The Guardian* (London), kindly took time to answer a few questions via e-mail. As an introduction to the women's football section on *The Guardian's* website, Gadgil wrote "The More Beautiful Game?" She has also written for the *Football Culture* website, sponsored by the *British Council*, on the state of the women's game in the U.K. ("The Women's Game in England—The Way Forward?"). Perhaps the most thorough source on the women's game in England is Sue Lopez's *Women on the Ball: A Guide to Women's Football* (London: Scarlet Press, 1997).

GG: Are *The Guardian's* efforts at covering women's football in the U.K. in response to increased local interest in the women's game, an effort to generate interest, or the result of other forces?

AG: There has been a women's football column in the *Guardian* newspaper since 2001, penned by **Paula Coccozza**. However, the women's football coverage that I began only came about because I am a big fan and a player and I brought it to the editor's attention that we should have a site where we can put the women's results and matches. The editor agreed wholeheartedly and encouraged me, as he thinks too that the women's game should be given a boost. However, realistically, it is not yet that popular and is only likely to pull in a relatively small amount of readers. I was not able to expend too much energy on it. It is timely, though; the women's game is definitely increasing in popularity, and most people when asked would be able to name a women's club, if not actually a player. This may sound like a joke, but England has been stuck in the Dark Ages when it comes to women's football, and the lights are only now being switched on. | [back to top](#)

GG: Would not the biggest boon to the women's game in England be qualification for the **World Cup**? Is qualification a serious goal of England's **Football Association**?

AG: The game desperately needs media coverage, which can only come about through an event such as [the World Cup], in order to get more sponsorship and more popularity, leading in turn to more funding, which will result in improvements in the game. It's a chicken-and-egg situation, because until the standards are raised significantly, people are not likely to watch it as they still compare it to the men's game, which obviously is of a tremendously high quality in this country. Therefore women's football needs more money poured into it to enable the girls to train more and work on fitness to raise the overall standards. The England team did not qualify for the World Cup this year, but the **European Championships** are to be held in England [in 2005] and should be a huge boost to everyone concerned with the game.

The FA are committed to qualification for the next World Cup, and they are hoping to use the European Cup as experience to help them through. Matches have been arranged against some of the best teams in the world who have qualified for the World Cup, e.g., the USA in May. | [back to top](#)

GG: I wonder about the effect on the women's game of affiliation with men's clubs. Clubs such as **Fulham**, until lately, and **Arsenal** seem, from an outsider's perspective, to support the women's game, but are they not

a hindrance by preventing the women's teams from developing their own identity? Are there other institutional alternatives for developing the women's game, via independently formed clubs or a European-wide league?

AG: The trend is now to affiliate with men's clubs as there is little chance of sufficient and effective funding if women's teams do not have the support of a men's club behind them. But although this may seem to obscure the separate identity of the women's clubs, being affiliated to the men actually gives the clubs far more exposure than before they joined—not to mention facilities. **Doncaster Belles** are the only premier league team that are not affiliated to a men's club and somehow, through very astute advertising and marketing, they have managed to make a profit and draw in very decent crowds. But they are a one-off. From what I have seen there is very little communication between the various women's leagues in Europe, and I don't think that a Euro-wide league is feasible, although attempts are occasionally made to hold friendlies. | [back to top](#)

GG: I have not seen, as yet, the film *Bend It Like Beckham*. But is its depiction of developing women players eyeing futures as professional footballers at all reflective of women's ambitions in the U.K., or pure fantasy?

AG: Many of the girls that I have spoken to, such as **Julie Fletcher** of **Arsenal**, **Rachel Yankey** of **Fulham**, and **Casey Stoney** of **Charlton**, all told me that it was their dream job to play football professionally, but they never thought it was possible when they were younger. Certainly girls who are into football can see that although they will not make the money that men can, there may be some financial gain in it. The film was not pure fantasy! [*Editor's note: See Anjana Gadgil's August 2003 [assessment](#) of *Bend It Like Beckham*.*] However, I think there needs to be more positive imagery of girls who are succeeding in what is traditionally a male sport—**Kelly Smith** of the **Philadelphia Charge** would be an excellent role model. | [back to top](#)

GG: Are there any trends in England indicating a greater presence for women as journalists covering football or as supporters?

AG: Football journalism has traditionally been very much male-dominated, but that is changing all the time. Initially it may have been due to positive discrimination, but nowadays there are so many women in the footballing world who clearly are very knowledgeable and passionate about football, that women covering football is rarely seen as odd. Women such as **Gabby Logan** of **ITV**, anchoring primetime football programmes, and **Amy Lawrence** of the **Observer** have helped pave the way. That's not to say it isn't very hard for women to break into, and some may be discouraged by the overwhelming male majority. | [back to top](#)