



*the*  
**FUTURE** *is*  
**FEMALE**

THE RISE OF SWEDISH  
WOMEN'S FOOTBALL

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***I'M NOT BOSSY,  
I'M THE BOSS.***

***BELIEVE IN YOUR  
DAMN SELF.***

***NEVER LOOK DOWN  
ON SOMEONE  
UNLESS YOU'RE  
HELPING HER UP.***

***THE FUTURE  
IS FEMALE.***

Recognise these quotes? Sweden's women wore them into battle during the 2017 Algarve Cup, making international news in the process. But the Swedish women's national team hardly needs such encouragement – they finished second in the 2003 Women's World Cup, were runners-up again at the Rio Olympics in 2016, and are currently ranked ninth in the world by FIFA. These messages were meant to encourage others to follow in their footsteps.

"We often talk about before 2003 and after 2003 in Sweden," says Linda Wijkström, General Secretary at Elitfotboll Dam (EFD). Despite the Swedes' defeat to Germany in the 2003 World Cup final, the game was a pivotal moment in Swedish football history. The match not only generated a record four million viewers across Sweden, but put women's football firmly on the public's radar.

Their achievement reinforced that women's football is just as exciting and competitive as the men's game. But although it brought heightened media attention and interest from sponsors, change remained slow. To this day, says Linda, women's sport receives just 20% of available public funding. 85% of Damallsvenskan clubs – clubs that compete in the fourth most-watched women's football league in the world – are self-financed.

"We need more funding to continue developing women's football in the way we want, and in the way society wants," says Linda.

That extra funding will not only help to encourage girls who want to become professional footballers, but also ensure that women's football can "continue to be an important actor in society" promoting integration, fitness and gender equality.

For women's football to grow, for the Damallsvenskan to remain one of the most competitive women's leagues in the world, and for the Swedish national team to fight for international titles, the country must retain girls' interest, says Linda. A high proportion of young female players quit around the ages of 15 and 16.

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# WOMEN PLAY FOOTBALL BECAUSE THEY LOVE PLAYING FOOTBALL.



Photo © Linda Wijkström

# MEN PLAY FOOTBALL BECAUSE THEY CAN EARN LOTS OF MONEY.

More recently, countries like Spain, the Netherlands, England and France have increased their investment in the women's game. However, a lack of investment in club football has made it difficult for teams to compete internationally. Linda tells me that women's football clubs simply can't afford to send their players to international matches, nor compensate for training and flights. The advantages taken for granted in the men's game are missing from women's football.

To overcome this hurdle, the EFD and partner clubs are implementing strategies to create more opportunities for female football players. The most significant change will be further investment in training. "One of the things that stops girls playing football is bad training. More investment is put into trainers' education for boys – and less on the girls."

Charlotta Nordenberg has been president of KIF Örebro DFF for six years. She says that, although there's an interest in women's

football, a lack of finance and poor matchday attendances remain significant challenges.

"It gets boring, always saying 'we're lacking money, we're lacking money', but unfortunately, it's always about money. If every city wants to have a top team, then we need to increase our budget 100%."

It's a seemingly impossible task. For the last seven years, the club's budget has remained the same. "We need to see if our sponsors are willing to give a little bit more, and give our girls the possibility of continuing to play football." There is a saying, Charlotta tells me: "women play football because they love playing football. Men play football because they can earn lots of money."

Women's football is hugely popular in Sweden – there are around 179,000 girls and women who want to play the game. Coupled with the country's focus on gender equality – Sweden is ranked the fourth most gender-equal country in the world by the World Economic forum – it's

perhaps surprising that, even here, female footballers are fighting for equal opportunities. Fighting to achieve their dreams.

Linda agrees. She tells me that knowledge of the women's game remains low throughout the country, and that the current government's failure to contribute towards professional women's football – despite being ostensibly 'feminist' in outlook – hardly helps matters.

"We have a law in Sweden that states companies can't donate equally. The amount of sponsorship is mostly judged on marketing values, which means that companies can't make the same donations to women's football as for men's," she explains. "We talk about equal sponsorship, but because of this rule, companies who want to promote equality are punished."

"If they really are a 'feminist government', they should create the same conditions for girls and boys to play their sport."

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"Marina Pettersson-Engström has played for KIF Örebro for 11 years. She tells me how her team members need additional support so they have more time to train – and therefore a greater chance to play professionally. While young male footballers may dream of scoring in a cup final or captaining their country at a World Cup, most girls have more humble dreams: to simply play the game to a professional standard. Unfortunately, minimal funding, cautious investment and archaic attitudes to women's football prevent many athletes from ever achieving even these dreams.

"I believe women's football divides opinions and perceptions in Sweden," says Carola Söberg, Örebro's goalkeeper-captain.

"The people who have negative comments about women's football will probably always feel that way, no matter what. I think it's important not to focus on that small negative group."

Putting such opinions to one side, the other struggle is a lack of professional progression. Carola explains how the players want to grow the game and achieve more – particularly when they see the possibilities and resources that are out there.

"Women's football is an unexplored market. When a club and an organisation truly invest in the game, you notice the knock-on effects – especially for players and clubs with very small financial means," she explains.

Women's football remains mostly an uncharted territory in Sweden. However, if you look abroad over the last four-to-five years, some of the world's biggest clubs are investing in their women's teams.

They're enthusiastic about the rewards and business it brings."

"In my opinion, if you believe in the product you're selling, in the long term everyone will benefit."

Carola's passion for football began when she was six years old, in her hometown of Karlstad. After playing in the 'little league', she went on to join the boy's team in Sommarro IF. From there she played for QBIK – the biggest women's football club in Karlstad.

"I began my senior career in the Damallsvenskan with Mallbackens IF, where I played for six years. I continued my playing career with Umeå IK for three years and Tyresö FF for three-and-a-half years."

Carola's first taste of professional football was with Umeå IK, "who at the time were one of the best clubs in the world".

"We had very frequent training and a lot of matches during the season – including Damallsvenskan, the Swedish Cup, and the Champions League. I also worked part-time at an advertising agency, but it was impossible to juggle both careers. I had to make a choice."

The decision was easy. She quit her job, started her own business, and committed to football. And yet, it's a decision that again highlights the contrasts between the men's and women's games. How many male pros have had to contemplate such sacrifices?

"It allowed me to focus on my football career. I think the main challenge was to adapt to a professional level and the amount of training and games. The level of training and preparation was very challenging and competitive, but I was surrounded by great players

and great staff. I loved every second of it."

Football is about uniting people, creating a community and allowing people to share their common passion. "Everyone who wants to should be encouraged to play football, whether through a club or with a group of friends," says Carola.

And thanks to this spirit, women's football has become one of the biggest growth movements in Sweden. In 2005, there were 56,225 registered female players over the age of 15, and by 2016, that number had almost doubled – reaching 99,951 in total. And now, the game is attracting the next generation of young fans.

"You can see there's a noticeable difference in the stands – especially at the national team games. There's also an increase in the number of young girls playing football. Nowadays, they have role models to identify with and look up to – which is extremely important."

Carola explains that the increase in audience numbers can be attributed to improved media coverage, with the launch of Damallsvenskan.tv meaning all Damallsvenskan matches can now be streamed worldwide – and selected clips sold on to Swedish domestic television stations.

The 2003 World Cup was a watershed moment for Swedish women's football. Progress has been steady since then, but who knows when the next watershed moment might be? With women like Linda Wijkström and Charlotta Nordenberg working tirelessly to promote the game from behind the scenes, there's little doubt that those Algarve Cup statements will be proved right. The future is female.



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