

You know we're at an odd crossroads in women's professional football when the clerk working at a video game store – a teen who's never watched a professional football match in his life – knows who Alexandra Morgan is, yet several sportswear megabrands tend to only issue press releases pertaining to male football teams. Granted, this clerk only knows about Morgan, a forward on the United States Women's National Team, because he's sold several copies of the Fifa 16 game, but he does know and he's not the only one.

# The kits and the cachet

**A**fter the United States Women's National Team (USWNT) beat Japan 5-3 in the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup (WWC), the event was hailed as a big success.

FIFA reported more than 1.3 million people attended the series of matches while broadcasters reported record audiences watching on television. The entire event brought in more than \$40 million in advertising revenue for American network Fox Sports, compared with \$6 million for the 2011 tournament.

The implications of evolving attention on this sport are vast: in global areas like sports marketing (*Forbes* magazine called Nike the "real winner" of the WWC) and in universal matters of gender equality (that the women's winning team received a \$2 million award while the men's team won \$35 million did not go unnoticed).

For now we are looking at the kits worn by professional female players – in both the WWC and beyond – and examining whether they too are evolving. But in doing this it's worth noting a few questions surrounding those issues of sports marketing and gender equality.

## Today's kits

Christine Nairn began playing football on the national circuit when she was only 9 years old, nearly two decades ago. She has worn many football kits. "Too often, soccer organisations have given women the same uniform as the men when they don't fit or flatter us," she says. Ms Nairn is now a midfielder for professional women's team Washington Spirit and



*Carli Lloyd led the US team to victory in the 2015 Women's World Cup, wearing kits that were famously devoid of the country's signature colors.*

 Nike

has also played for USWNT. "I love the thought of equality, but sometimes those shorts could fit a little weird for women."

Ms Nairn is pleased to note that this is no longer the case. "[Now] my favourite aspect of the uniform is the fit of the jersey and shorts," she says.

This is a credit to the league's partnership with Nike. While Nike has sponsored the USWNT since 1995, the brand began a partnership with the broader US National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) in 2012. Nike recently announced that interest in NWSL was at an all-time high, having just set a single-season attendance record of 454,100 fans.

WSA talked with Ms Nairn and two other Spirit players about this season's kits and how they compare to seasons past. Based near Washington, DC, Spirit is named for the country's capital and has a Nike kit that includes a red and navy blue jersey, red shorts and red socks.

For Crystal Dunn, the fit of the newest jerseys reflects an ongoing improvement in design. "As a smaller player, jerseys have had a tendency to feel too big," she says. Though perhaps small in stature, Ms Dunn is one of the biggest names in women's football today. In addition to playing defence for Washington Spirit, she plays for the USWNT and this year became the youngest player to win both the NWSL's MVP award and Golden Boot award. "In the past, I have sometimes felt like I was wearing a T-shirt," she says. But with today's jerseys, "I like the fit. I feel that they look more professional".

Spirit midfielder Tori Huster agrees. "More recently, the fit of the uniform has been more geared towards a feminine physique instead of your run-of-the-mill men's cut," she says, "which makes things easier and more comfortable to wear, especially when playing at a high intensity."

Colour matters too. "I like this uniform best because it sticks out in the league," says Ms Nairn. "So often teams' colours are the same, so you can't differentiate between teams just by looking at the uniforms. Every team wants to stand out.

This sentiment was tested when, last spring, Nike revealed the Women's World Cup uniforms for the US Women's National Team. The players were thrilled, while journalists, bloggers and fans decried the look. USWNT striker Abby Wombach called them "stunning" while a *USA Today* columnist called them "un-American". The reason? The home kits lacked the expected red, white and blue palette.

Controversy notwithstanding, the company said the primarily-white kits were designed for maximum visual impact on the pitch. A contrasting black stripe runs down the sides of the jersey and shorts, intended to highlight movement, while a gradient of white to "volt"



(Nike's patented neon-yellow-lime-greenish colour) moves down the socks and to the shoes. Four versions of boots, which incorporate volt and a (host nation) Canada-inspired "Blue Lagoon" colour, complete the head-to-toe look.

The design was deceptively simple but the technology was anything but. With the use of 3D body mapping, the uniforms were able to achieve a fully-articulated female-specific fit to facilitate ease of movement and comfort. The kits are 16% lighter than previous versions and wick away sweat, while laser-cut ventilation side holes and mesh panelling (including a full-mesh jersey back), aid air circulation and thermoregulation.

The Spirit enjoys the fruits of Nike R&D as well. "The materials have definitely changed – shirts, shorts and socks. They've become more player friendly," says Ms Huster. "The materials are lighter and allow for fluid movements. They aren't restricting whereas in the past, the material of shirts and shorts was often heavy or thick and tight in strange areas. Nowadays, there is more breathability which allows sweat to not accumulate on the actual uniform."

Adidas was another name seen on the field at the WWC, as a major partner with FIFA and designers of kits for Germany, Japan and others. The adidas uniforms for all female football players integrate the company's Climacool technology and are more than just modified male kits, according to assistant product manager for adidas football, Marissa Schultz.

*The jersey for Germany's Women's World Cup team, designed by adidas, integrated female-specific requests to express style and identity.*

 adidas





Female kits were once the same as male's, but not anymore, says *Washington Spirit* midfielder Christine Nairn.

Chris Colvin/*Washington Spirit*

"We collaborate with our female athletes and consumers to integrate their specific needs into our football apparel. Male and female athletes have different body types and we take this into consideration when developing our patterns, both for female players as well as female football fans," says Ms Schultz. "We also utilise different materials in some cases that, for example, offer greater stretch for a female player and her specific biomechanical movements."

Some of these needs vary from team to team, region to region. "Even amongst female athletes there are different market needs for which we account," she says. "For example, the North American market typically requests shorter length for shorts than the European market. As demonstrated by our recent World Cup kits, we also look to integrate female-specific design requests to allow female athletes and teams to express their own style and identity."

## Coverage (and we don't mean shorts length)

The adidas WWC kit is one of those places where uniforms reflect a broader point of interest: for the 2014 World Cup, adidas also designed kits for several countries' men's teams. With designs came press releases announcing partnerships and vibrant images of the accompanying uniforms. Leading up to the 2015 Women's World Cup, adidas put out a colourful press release about the official game ball, but almost no mention of new adidas kits for any of the women's teams.

Similarly, on Umbro Canada's website, any mention of the women's national team is hard to find. Puma issued press releases for the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 European Championship, but not the 2015 Women's World Cup.

Reviews of the coverage of Women's World Cup took note of this. In a *Washington Post* article titled "Why hardly anyone sponsored the most-watched soccer match in US history", reporter Drew Harwell wrote: "...companies that invested exhaustively in ad blitzes and social media around last year's [men's] tournament proved staggeringly quiet during the Women's World Cup... [many companies] remain skittish to spend money on a sport without the proven returns of a bigger spectacle [or] the market power other sports can command on shelves."

Adidas, however, maintains that it is embracing professional women's football. "As the female game continues to evolve and establish its own culture, we look forward to continued collaboration with female football athletes, to understand them and their interaction with the game," says Ms Schultz. For Ms Schultz, who is herself an avid footballer, currently playing for FC Nürnberg in the third division in Germany, "it is an honour and a pleasure to [help] female football athletes achieve their goals on an ever growing global stage".

For the Canadian national team, social media helps to compensate. When the new Umbro home kits were released, Canada Soccer announced it proudly; the jerseys, made of 100% spun polyester, incorporated clever, personalised details such as Canadian Maple Leaf laser cut

Alex Morgan is featured on the US cover of *FIFA 16*, which for the first time includes women's football teams.

EA Sports



venting on the back for air circulation and the custom font for lettering and numbering was named "Les Rouges". The team ensured its ongoing coverage by introducing the hashtag #CanadaRED and encouraging fans to share photos on social media.

And while Puma's leaping big black cat emblem was little seen beyond the WWC kits of Switzerland, Cameroon and Ivory Coast, Puma enthusiastically promotes its star athlete, Marta Vieira da Silva. Known simply as "Marta", the Brazilian footballer is widely believed to be the world's greatest female player (and has been affectionately nicknamed "Pele in skirts" by Pele himself). Puma's slick, stylish and cheeky ad campaigns starring Marta have garnered worldwide attention.

And then there is the gaming world, where women's football is experiencing a boost of attention from one of its broadest (and perhaps unexpected) audiences yet. In May, EA Sports announced that it would be including Women's National Teams in the 2016 version of the FIFA video game. The company said this was "one of the most requested features in recent years" and called the inclusion "a huge milestone for both our franchise and the sport". Released in September, the game continues to top sales charts.

### An unstoppable force

It seems safe to conclude that the state of professional women's football kits is solid; that female players are generally pleased with the kits' appearance and performance. It is also evident that the sport itself is gaining respect and momentum on a global scale. But for growth in both of those areas, more attention and investment – from the brands that support these players and the networks capable of televising games – is essential.

Anyone doubting that this momentum will continue need only to look beyond the professional pitches to the grassy fields of community leagues. In a small Florida town, for example, Lion Point Sports Complex is a sprawling space filled with soccer fields, tennis courts and playgrounds. At one floodlit pitch, 10-year-old girls face each other in the sixth soccer game of the season.

Today, there are enough girls to cover each position and to line the bench with substitutes waiting to jump in; there are female teams playing on other fields and still others waiting for their games to start.


These girls know what they are doing. They are skilled players, dribbling and passing and shooting with finesse. They are confident and fit, with a nuanced understanding of positioning and the stamina to run up and down the field as the team's needs shift. And there are the socks:



*The Brazil player known as "Marta" has been called "the female Pele".*

 Puma

many have replaced the monochromatic league-issued socks with their own. Knee-high and designed to accommodate shin guards, the socks' patterns and bold colours bring flair to the otherwise gritty pitch.

These are girls who spent hours on the couch last summer watching the Women's World Cup; on Friday nights they ask their parents to drive them to the local university to watch women's football (well, they call it "soccer") games. These girls are the future of women's football – and their socks might be the future of women's football kits. 

*Boots were integral to the US Women's national team's kit, as the gradient in the socks flowed toward the Volt and Blue Lagoon in the shoes.*

 Nike

