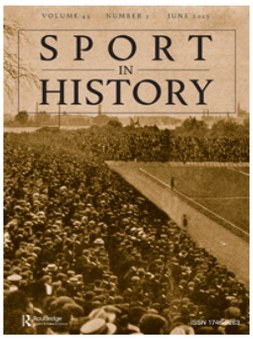

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The Football Association's 1993 takeover of women's football – A Hobson's Choice

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ABSTRACT

In 1993 the Women's Football Association (WFA), the organisation which had run women's football in England for 24 years, ceded control of the sport to the Football Association (FA). This has often been represented as a progressive move for women's football, but the research presented here – grounded in oral history interviews and an analysis of relevant archival documents – disputes this interpretation. The WFA administration was undoubtedly weak and divided, and was unable to cope with the dramatic growth of women's football which occurred in the late 1980s, while WFA members did want more FA recognition of and support for women's football – but not at the expense of an independently-functioning WFA. It was the FA who chose to pursue a total takeover, ignoring the opposition expressed by WFA members in the years between 1990 and 1993. Finally, an examination of the years post-1993 demonstrates that the FA's move came at the detriment of women's football continuing to have a significant voice in governance: the under-representation of women within football governance in the UK needs to be seen as one legacy of the 1993 takeover. Overall, the takeover should be seen as a moment of disempowerment for women's football.

KEYWORDS Women's football; women's sport; sports governance; governance mergers

In 1993 the Women's Football Association (WFA), the organisation which had run women's football in England for 24 years, ceded control of the sport to the Football Association (FA). In an oral history interview two decades later Sheila Rollinson, Secretary of Derby Ladies, recalled attending the final meeting of the WFA, which took place at Highbury on 6 February 1993:

> Some of us went to the pub round the corner from Arsenal and drowned our sorrows … it was like Hobson's choice, you know, we got a vote on it, but actually if we didn't vote we were going to be kind of thrown out of the FA again. We'd got no real choice.

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Sheila's recollections differ markedly from popular references to the FA's takeover of women's football. One *New Statesman* article from 2019 referred to the WFA's tenure as the period when '[w]omen's football went to sleep, until in 1993 the FA relented and took it over'.[1] The FA's own website presents the merger as having been a voluntary undertaking on behalf of the WFA, stating that the WFA 'voted to pass over its activities to The FA'.[2]

In reality, historical research delving deeper into the merger period has been sparse. Although there is an ever-expanding body of work on the history of women's football, much of this has focused on the FA's 1921 ban on women's football, with this seen as the key turning point in the development of women's football.[3] Significantly less attention has been paid to the 1993 'merger' of the WFA with the FA, which was arguably an even more momentous event in women's football history. It is, after all, only since the merger that women's football has experienced significant commercial growth. Where the merger is referred to, it is passed over briefly as a move which is assumed to have been the only and best path towards growth for women's football. This is despite the fact that the broader academic literature on sports governance mergers is critical of their impact on gender equality and equity.[4]

The research presented here is based on a project carried out between January 2023 and May 2024 titled 'Stronger Together? The Legacies of the 1993 Merger of the Football Association and the Women's Football Association'.[5] This project was funded by FIFA via its Research Scholarship programme, and received ethical approval from the Bournemouth University Ethics Committee (Ethics ID 49367). The aim was to explore the 1993 WFA-FA merger and its legacies, using the lessons of this merger to inform future best practice governance for football in the UK. The initial phase of the research involved analysis of archival documents at the WFA archive housed at the British Library in London; the FA minutes at the National Football Museum in Manchester; and the Sports Council archive at the University of Birmingham. The Sports Council was the government quango responsible for providing funding to the WFA, and was also influential in the WFA-FA merger, providing a policy context whereby women National Governing Bodies (NGBs) were strongly encouraged to join up with their male counterparts for efficiency reasons.[6] The material in these archives is largely unexplored by sports historians, partly because the WFA material was only deposited at the British Library in 2016.

However, while there are a raft of sources relating to the merger period, revealing numerous interactions between the WFA and the FA, there are also 'silences' in the archive.[7] Historical archives provide sanitised and partial versions of official events: oral histories can provide more nuanced and diverse perspectives, and can be especially helpful at wrestling with the emotions surrounding a tumultuous event like a merger.[8] To supplement

Table 1. List of oral history interviewees.

Name of interviewee	Role in Women's Football Association/Football Association
Patricia Gregory	WFA Vice Chair
June Jaycocks	WFA International Officer
Tony Blair	WFA Disciplinary Officer
Sheila Rollinson	WFA Midlands Representative
Sue Foulkes	WFA Midlands Representative
Julie Hemsley	FA Council Member
Clare Taylor	England Player

the archival analysis, oral history interviews were therefore conducted with seven people who were involved in the WFA at the time of and immediately after the merger, exploring their memories of the process (Table 1).

Six interviews were carried out in person, and one took place over the phone. Informed consent was sought from all interviewees, who were provided with an opportunity to review the full transcript and retract any remarks: ultimately, only one interviewee requested this, highlighting two sections of the text which they did not want to be used in the research. All interviewees consented to their real names being shared. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were analysed thematically. The oral histories have been read intertextually with the archival material, to provide a richer and more in-depth understanding of the merger process.

The remainder of this article explores three pertinent questions, aiming to advance our understanding of the merger period. Firstly, given that the running of women's football had been 'outsourced' to the WFA from 1971, why did the FA decide to take control of the running of women's football in 1993? Secondly, given the opposition outlined by Rollinson above, why did members of the WFA not do more to resist the FA's encroachment on their affairs? And finally, what changed in the immediate aftermath of the FA takeover and, therefore, how should we assess the merger as a whole from our twenty-first century vantage point? Overall, the merger was a process of disempowerment, carried out by the FA without consultation, resulting in a masculinisation of football leadership which has continued to the present day.

1993: A merger or a takeover?

First, a note on language. This research aimed to ensure a more nuanced assessment of the WFA-FA merger. Current interpretations present the merger largely in a favourable light, and as something which has been positive for the development and growth of English women's football. Jean Williams describes the WFA as 'ultimately a failure', a view with which Sue Lopez concurred in her history of women's football: 'The WFA had to turn to the FA to rescue women's football from its problems.'[9] There is

also a suggestion that the WFA went into the process willingly, as it felt ill-equipped to deal with the growth of women's football. For example, Williams labels the merger 'a hand-over rather than a take-over'.[10] A 2006 report by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport celebrated the FA's assumption of control as 'of enormous benefit for women's football'.[11]

However, these interpretations are at odds with the broader literature on organisational mergers in sport. Internationally, studies of amalgamations between men's and women's sporting organisations have found that such processes increase male control at the expense of female autonomy.[12] Across English sport as a whole, recent research has demonstrated that the transition from separate to merged governance which took place in the 1990s was profoundly disempowering for women in many sports, including squash and cricket.[13] While much of the recent growth of interest in and the professionalisation seen at the elite levels of women's sport have come about as a result of investment from male-led NGBs, mergers in sports like cricket have come at a cost: women have traded seats at the table of power for access to funding and other key resources.[14]

The business management literature makes a distinction between a 'merger' of equal partners and an 'acquisition' or a 'takeover', which involves the purchase of a smaller company by a larger one.[15] Within oral history interviews, the events of 1993 were frequently referred to as not a merger, but a takeover:

> I think of it as a takeover. They took it over. (Patricia Gregory)

> But merger – no, we couldn't – a merger would mean that they welcomed us with open arms, wouldn't it? … Which I couldn't honestly say that. No, I couldn't honestly say that … I felt that it was more like a business venture. Because we needed help, they were taking us over. (June Jaycocks)

> It wasn't a merger of any sort; it was a complete takeover. (Sheila Rollinson)

Oral historians should, where possible, adopt the terminology of our interviewees, or we risk issues of interpretive conflict.[16] For the remainder of this article, the FA's assumption of control is therefore described as a takeover, rather than a merger.

'Concern about administration': the FA's decision to take control of women's football

The FA was always an outlier in outsourcing the governance of women's football to a separate organisation. As early as 1971, the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) had passed a motion which stated that member countries needed to take control of the development of women's football. Most European countries chose to run women's and men's football jointly under the same organisation. But in England the FA decreed that the WFA, which had been independently founded in 1969 as a response to the

FA ban on women's football, would come under formal FA supervision, albeit at arm's length. The quid pro quo was that the FA would 'have no control over the finances of the WFA and would not give financial assistance'.[17] Pat Gregory, one of the WFA founders in 1969 and Vice Chair at the time of the FA takeover, recalled that in the early years, the FA's help had been extremely limited:

> They, okay, grudgingly lifted the 1921 ban … we had an official channel and we could talk to them and there was never a question that they were going to do any more than that. There was no money. We had no money from them for several years … we couldn't even from the FA get kit out of them, to go back. I used to write to whoever was in charge and say, "Can your kit sponsors not give us a set of kit?" … "No".[18]

The WFA minutes show that the WFA asked the FA for money several times, and was initially refused financial assistance.[19]

From 1983, the FA did give the WFA a small grant to assist with running women's football. By the late 1980s, the WFA was also in receipt of grants from the Sports Council and the Football Trust, a government-funded body which had been set up in 1975, originally to assist with implementing new safety guidance at UK sports stadia (see Table 2). In 1990, the annual Football Trust grant rose substantially, from £20,000 to £75,000.

Despite this influx of grant income, as the 1990s dawned, the WFA was struggling financially to remain afloat. Pat Gregory recalled:

> By the time we had run out of money in 1992, or really 1991, and we were talking seriously to the FA from 1990/1991 onwards about them taking us on because we knew that we could not afford to invest … by the time we folded in the end of '93 we were £28,000 in debt … We were not generating enough income to follow through with the aspirations that we had or we wanted to see. We weren't getting the level of sponsorship that they [the FA] ultimately got.[20]

Archival documents bear out Pat's assessment that by 1992, the WFA had accumulated significant debt—approximately £26,000 worth at the point of the FA takeover.[21] The WFA accounts for June 1992 show that the WFA received a grant of £70,000 from the Sports Council and £45,000 from the Football Trust, yet still operated at a loss of £4,896.[22] Clearly, this financial situation was not sustainable over the longer term.

Ironically, the dramatic growth of women's football at this time created a dilemma for the WFA: it was a small, largely amateur association which struggled to effectively manage the sport. In 1989, Channel 4 broadcast the

Table 2. Grants to the WFA from the Sports Council and Football Trust.

	1988–89	1989–90	1990–91	1991–92	1992–93
Sports Council	£30,000	£30,000	£35,000	£40,000	£70,000
Football Trust	£20,000	£20,000	£75,000	£75,000	£45,000

WFA Cup Final for the first time, generating huge interest. Three years later, the WFA's paid secretary Linda Whitehead – one of only two full-time members of staff – reported that the WFA Office in Manchester was floundering in response to the demand the broadcast had generated:

> an increase of some 60% in membership as well as an unbelievable growth in interest from outside organisations. She [Linda] informed the members she was now working an average of 70 hours every week to try and ensure at least part of the workload was dealt with.[23]

The inadequate administrative set-up was cited by the WFA as one reason why it commenced talks with the FA in 1991 to discuss a closer relationship.[24]

However, the real tipping point appears to have come after Richard Faulkner (who was Deputy Chairman of the Football Trust) resigned from his role as WFA Chair in October 1991, creating concerns that both the Trust and the Sports Council would withdraw funding from the WFA. Faulkner, who had been nominated as WFA Chair in 1988, seems to have been convinced from the start of his tenure that the WFA administration needed a shake-up, and was holding meetings as early as January 1990 with senior officials of the FA, including Chief Executive Graham Kelly, Director of Coaching Charles Hughes and Deputy Chief Executive Pat Smith 'about the possibility of integrating the administration of the WFA into the FA'.[25]

According to newspaper reports, Faulkner's resignation came about because WFA officers 'refused to back his plans to give the FA greater say over the administration and finances of the WFA'.[26] Tony Blair, the WFA's Disciplinary Officer, recollected:

> Richard Faulkner was the Chairman of the Women's FA during that period … And he actually resigned because, because the clubs wouldn't go over to the FA … And at that point we thought, "Well, if that's the case, how are we going to get any further grant from the – being in the position that we were in, how are we going to get any more grants from the Sports Council?" … if we were going to carry on as we were carrying on, where was the money going to come from? … We just didn't have it.

The WFA's fears were not unfounded. At an Extraordinary General Meeting called in December 1991, specifically to discuss the relationship between the WFA and the FA, the WFA revealed to members that in the wake of Faulkner's resignation, the Trust was indeed withholding a promised £45,000 grant, while the Sports Council was withholding £40,000 'due to concern about administration'.[27] By 1992, the Trust had concluded that it would pay all international grant aid directly to the FA, which would then administer it to the WFA.[28]

The FA may have lost patience at this point partly due to the wider challenges facing English football. The small amount of space allotted to women's

football in the FA Executive Committee minutes between 1990 and 1993 can be seen as evidence that it was seen by the FA as a relatively minor concern, certainly in relation to issues like the Taylor Report and the broader aftermath of Hillsborough, which consumed a great deal of bandwidth in the early 1990s.[29] It was therefore in the FA's interests to ensure any financial issues facing women's football were dealt with swiftly and efficiently, rather than involving itself in protracted negotiations with the WFA Committee. Additionally, while this is not explicitly referenced in the minutes, the FA may have had an added incentive to bring the WFA back into more direct control, due to its growing concern about the potential (and, in 1992, actual) breakaway of the new men's Premier League.[30]

The FA was also operating in a policy environment whereby the Sports Council was increasingly putting pressure on governing bodies to 'rationalise' their activities via mergers between men's and women's associations.[31] As one Sports Council policy document from 1992 stated:

> The arguments for the integration of separate men's and women's associations in such sports as hockey, golf, lacrosse, cricket, football, rugby and bowls rest on the basis of efficiency, effectiveness, avoidance of duplication and the overall promotion and development of the sport.[32]

Faulkner's letter of resignation is housed in the WFA Archive, and clarifies that while he had become increasingly frustrated by various aspects of the administration, the clincher had been 'the receipt of a letter from the Sports Council which makes clear that the development of a closer relationship with the FA may become a condition of future grant aid support from that organisation'. He felt, therefore, that if officers and members continued to oppose a closer relationship with the FA, he could no longer 'safeguard the future of the WFA', which was (as discussed above) reliant financially on Sports Council grant aid.[33]

Contemporaneous evidence supports the suggestion that the Sports Council wanted to see more evidence of the WFA working with the FA. In September 1991, Joe Patton from the Sports Council wrote to David Hunt, the WFA Treasurer, stating that he was 'increasingly concerned about the administration and development of women's football' and concluding that 'women's football could be considerably strengthened by developing a much closer working relationship with the FA'.[34] This, combined with the Council's decision to withhold a substantial grant, all added to the external pressures on the WFA to consider a closer relationship with the FA.

Of course, the FA had agency here. Initially, according to the FA Executive Committee minutes from February 1991, the FA Executive had agreed that it would administer 'some of' the activities of the WFA only, and that 'the WFA should retain a full-time Secretariat if the proposals should proceed'. But by February 1992, in the wake of Faulkner's resignation, the

FA Executive had become concerned about the WFA's failure to file its Annual Accounts to Companies House in timely fashion, and authorised its Chairman to 'investigate this further apparent failure in the WFA administration and take appropriate action at the earliest opportunity'.[35] The action involved the FA organising for the Football Trust and Sports Council grants to be paid directly into its own account, rather than the WFA's.[36] This was patently the first step on the path towards a full takeover.

This analysis of WFA and FA archival material, combined with insights from the oral history interviews, points us to several conclusions. Firstly, pressure from the Sports Council hurried along what might otherwise have been a naturally developing relationship between the WFA and FA, echoing the situation in other sports.[37] Secondly, in the case of women's football, there was added pressure from the Football Trust, triggered by the resignation of Faulkner and his own influence within the footballing world. Finally, the WFA administration was undoubtedly weak and divided, and unable to cope with the growth of women's football. However, it is also important to recognise that the FA had both agency and power in this situation. The FA's professional clout dwarfed that of the amateur WFA, but it could have chosen to use that clout to assist an overstretched team of volunteers in the running of women's football. Instead, a decision was made to take it over altogether.

'All the doors were slammed in our faces': reluctant acquiescence to the FA takeover

As the FA took steps towards a full takeover, how was the WFA responding? At the very top level, the WFA officers were split: Sue Lopez, who joined the WFA as Development Officer in 1991, writes that three of the WFA officers were against a closer relationship (although she does not identify them by name), while the minutes indicate that Honorary Secretary David Marlowe and Treasurer David Hunt were both in favour due to concerns about the long-term financial viability of the WFA.[38] On the other hand, those WFA members who attended meetings, as well as employees like Linda Whitehead, wished to retain the WFA's independence.[39] It must also be acknowledged that there was a degree of apathy amongst the membership. Many players, for example, simply wanted to focus on the game, rather than the governance: in my interview with England defender Clare Taylor, she described the FA takeover as 'a bit hazy. It was just like you're in the England squad and then instead of getting a letter with the WFA logo on it you were getting one from, with the FA on.'[40]

Handily for historians, we can get some sense of contemporary opinion amongst members from a questionnaire circulated to all WFA clubs in June 1991, which was part of a consultation process initiated by the WFA

officers. The questionnaire stated: 'We hope … a consensus view will emerge which will form the basis of a paper which can be discussed with the FA.'[41] In the questionnaire, it asked members about whether and how they felt the FA should be involved in running the England national team, administering the WFA Cup, and administering the National League; and whether the WFA should retain its own administrative staff. Responses were received from only 30 clubs (out of 240 circulated), which adds weight to the suggestion that there was widespread apathy from the membership – although admittedly they may not have realised that the entire future of the WFA was at stake.

The overall feeling amongst members who did respond was that while help from the FA would be welcomed, the preference was to retain some form of independent WFA. For example, while 19 of the 30 clubs who responded were in favour of the FA helping with the administration of the WFA Cup, all agreed that control of the competition should 'stay with the WFA'. Comments included:

> Whilst in favour of the FA assisting with the WFA Cup we should be wary.
>
> In favour to a certain extent of the FA doing the WFA Cup but before committing ourselves should be wary of the drawbacks.
>
> Assistance ONLY not take it over.
>
> Although not against must have sight of 'Pro's' and 'Con's' and before we commit ourselves.
>
> Yes in favour but restrictions placed on the FA on how far they can go with the Competition.
>
> Reluctant for the FA Competitions Department getting too involved in the administration of the WFA Cup in case the WFA lost ownership and control altogether.[42]

There were numerous reasons why members may have reacted favourably to greater FA involvement in women's football. Firstly, some interviewees believed that this was necessary in order for women to progress in coaching or refereeing roles. June Jaycocks, the WFA's International Officer, recalled:

> A lot of them [players], they wanted to do things that they couldn't do. Coaching boys and girls and all of this. And I think they were all quite waiting for it to happen … And I think all they thought was, 'Well, let's hope that they let us do what we're doing now and not sort of put too many spokes in', you know … But a lot of the girls, I mean they were sort of taking exams and things like that, and they wanted to go into all sorts of things, which they needed the FA for as well. Because if you want an FA badge, you've got to have the FA behind you, haven't you.[43]

Similarly, Sue Foulkes – who was part of the Midlands WFA Committee – said that the lack of facilities made available to the WFA by those in the men's game convinced her that a closer relationship with the FA was necessary:

> All the doors were slammed in our faces basically … unless someone opened some doors and let us get into clubs and get grounds, there just wasn't enough future to grow your clubs really … You can't forever change in a car or on the car park.[44]

There was another spectre which loomed large in the imaginations of WFA officers and members, too: the 1921–71 ban, which was still (just about) within living memory. The alternative to the FA takeover was a return to those days: 'All FA facilities would be withdrawn … the FA would take [our] grounds, referees etc.', Marlowe wrote in January 1993, when asked what would happen if WFA members were to say they did not want to go in with the FA.[45] Several interviewees concurred with this statement:

> If we wanted to play international matches we had to do it under the aegis of the National Association, and the National Association member of FIFA was the FA … we weren't going to succeed on our own; we had to have a relationship. (Pat Gregory)

> They ultimately are the arbiter of football in this country, and what they say goes. So it was kind of a finality to it, and just an acceptance. (Sheila Rollinson)

Far from embracing a merger, there is a clear sense from these quotes that WFA members felt backed into a corner by a body which dwarfed their own in size, scale, and power.

The actual process by which the FA enacted the takeover can also be seen as a 'boiling frog' policy, whereby it did not make its intentions clear until the process was too advanced for members to object. The FA initially presented its involvement as 'helping out' the WFA in order to 'lighten the administrative load on the WFA Office'.[46] Jaycocks recalled:

> I think they [the membership] all thought that we were – you know, just going to be our own Women's Football Association but abiding by the FA rules. Which we were quite happy to do.[47]

But as members gradually came to realise, ultimately – once the FA had decided upon a full takeover – they were powerless to stop it (much like a frog in a saucepan of boiling water). Firstly, ever since the WFA had been brought under the FA umbrella in 1971, it had always been possible under UEFA rules for the FA to decide to sweep aside the WFA and run women's football directly. This was a significant difference from other women's sports (such as cricket and hockey) which were also considering mergers with the men at this time, but at least had the ability to vote

autonomously on the move. By contrast, at the last ever WFA Annual General Meeting (AGM) in February 1993, David Marlowe informed the assembled WFA members of the reality of the situation:

> in the 1970s FIFA [*sic*] issued a directive which stated that all Football Associations should control women's football. The Football Association at that time decided to allow the Women's FA to have control of its own sport, however, at any time they could have taken back this control, they did not, but now they have decided to do so.[48]

This knowledge also shaped the takeover process itself, which was much less collaborative than in other sports. The FA's nominal 'negotiation' process with the WFA mostly consisted of the WFA Officers being 'summoned' to meetings with the FA and 'informed the FA have overall responsibility for the game and its development'.[49] This was the opposite to a genuine consultation process. Indeed, WFA Chairman Tim Stearn reported in February 1992 that the FA were 'unhappy' with the attempt to instigate a consultation process amongst WFA members, as evidenced by the questionnaire, and insisted the process be halted: 'They did not consider it at all satisfactory that no contact was planned with them until March 1992 and that there was no point in any further unofficial discussions. The discussions must from now on be official.'[50] Despite the feelings of members, the FA had evidently decided that it was time to assume direct control of the WFA.

By the end of 1992, the FA had unilaterally decided to appoint a new Co-ordinator for Women's Football to work out of the FA's own offices in Potters Bar, without discussing the appointment with the WFA; and had set up their own Working Committees 'to facilitate the transfer of the major operations of the WFA Ltd to the Football Association'.[51] The FA did invite one WFA Officer to serve on each committee – David Marlowe on the Constitutional Committee, Pat Gregory on the International Committee, Sandra Fleet on the Competitions Committee, David Hunt on the Finance Committee, and Mary Hull on the Coaching and Education Committee. However, the committees were otherwise made up entirely of FA appointments, meaning that the FA had a clear majority voice in decision-making. This is in direct contrast with the equivalent merger of English hockey, which took place in 1995–96 and involved a full member consultation on the proposed merger and the establishment of a working party with an equal number of representatives from both associations.[52]

Once it became apparent that a full takeover was on the cards, WFA members did attempt to pull the available constitutional levers to prevent it. The 5 December 1992 AGM had to be adjourned after representatives from the East Midlands, and the Transatlantic Ladies and Oxford United clubs, sought to suspend the meeting amidst heated discussions about the FA takeover which included the allegation that Stearn was 'selling the

WFA down the river'.[53] When the AGM resumed in February 1993, the Eastern Region proposed that the remit of the FA should be confined to the three areas originally proposed: coaching, international fixtures, and running the national WFA Cup. However, a constitutional loophole was used by officers to prevent the motion being discussed—namely, that members had not been notified of the proposal within the required 43 days.[54]

Those who attended the final WFA meeting at Highbury in February 1993 remember it as a sombre affair. Unlike in other sports, there was no specific vote to accept the FA's assumption of control per se: it was already viewed as a fait accompli by this point. Instead, discussion centred on practicalities such as nomination procedures for FA working parties and the future closure of the WFA Office.[55] Tony Blair said:

> Where in the past other meetings had been a bit boisterous, this one particularly wasn't, because I think everybody knew that the writing was on the wall … Even if they'd have voted against it, then it would have been a case of, "Well, I'm sorry, but that's the way it is … the Women's FA now is defunct … so how you're going to carry on playing football, we don't know" … But it was carried by the majority … After that meeting, the following week, then we went into our office in Manchester and just cleared it out. And the rest, as they say, is history.[56]

This reinforces the sense of the merger having been a takeover which was not wanted by many within the women's football community. Otherwise, why not permit the assembled members to at least discuss limiting the parameters of the FA's involvement, as some clearly wanted to do?

This section has highlighted several important takeaways regarding the FA's takeover of WFA affairs. Firstly, WFA members did want more FA recognition of and support for women's football, but not at the expense of an independently functioning WFA. Secondly, members did attempt to express their opposition to the takeover, via all available means. However, once the FA had decided that it was dissatisfied with the administration of women's football, there was very little effective resistance possible. When the WFA attempted to initiate a consultation process with members, the FA expressed its displeasure, and ignored the results. The FA was an all-powerful actor in the process. It is therefore problematic to present the takeover as a moment of progress for women's football: it needs to be seen as a moment of disempowerment.

Assessing the aftermath of the FA takeover

The immediate impact of the FA takeover was a transfer of administrative authority from the WFA to the FA. In January 1993, the FA's Constitutional Working Party agreed that the WFA Office in Manchester would close, and that the administration of girls' and women's football would be transferred to

the FA's Potters Bar office, supposedly for efficiency reasons 'in order to make best use of the funds available for girls' and women's football'.[57] Linda Whitehead and the handful of other WFA staff were made redundant.

The direct 'successor' organisation to the WFA was the Women's Football Alliance, which held its inaugural meeting on 18 July 1993. All women's leagues and clubs could send representatives to attend meetings, and for the first year of its existence, it was staffed by former officers of the WFA. However, the Alliance had no real decision-making authority. Instead, power was concentrated in the hands of the FA's new Women's Football Committee. The Alliance sent three representatives to this committee, but on an overall committee of nine, any WFA/Alliance 'voice' was clearly outnumbered. The FA chose to appoint its own men as the Committee Chair (Ray Kiddell) and Vice-Chair (Peter Hough). Similarly, Julie Hemsley was elected by the Alliance to be the singular 'women's football representative' on the main FA Council—a position she held for ten years. Instead of utilising existing expertise, the FA also favoured its own appointments elsewhere: its new Women's Football Co-ordinator was a Mrs Susan Thomas, who had 'little knowledge of women's football' when she started the role,[58] while England manager John Bilton was asked to leave his role in favour of Ted Copeland, who had never coached in women's football before.[59] One outcome of the FA takeover was therefore that the voice of women's football within the broader Football Association was strategically minimised.

This sense of lacking an effective voice in the new governance structures was reflected in several oral history interviews carried out as part of this research. For example, Sheila Rollinson felt:

> like you'd been abandoned almost … they [the FA] did things like although they kept the FA Cup going, it became the FA Women's Cup, not the WFA Cup … It was trying to wipe out everything that we'd done, really, because they wanted nothing to do with us.[60]

The decision of the FA to rename the WFA National Cup the FA Challenge Cup, and change the Women's National League to the FA Women's Premier League, helped reinforce the sense that the FA's goal was to place its own stamp on women's football with little regard for the legacy of the WFA or its members. Dual football-cricket international Clare Taylor argued in an oral history interview that this was a key difference between the WFA-FA merger and the merger of the Women's Cricket Association with the England & Wales Cricket Board (ECB) in 1998:

> You need, you need the people fighting the women's corner to be good people. And within the cricket BB [Barbara Daniels] was, and then I think Connie [Clare Connor] has continued it on. The FA … I think it was a complete cut, wasn't it? … The FA put a lot of men in charge who didn't really know much about the game and I think because of that, I think that's why cricket

> has advanced a little bit quicker, because they understood. It was almost like, "we'll give you the money, you've got the expertise, crack on with it". Whereas the football a little bit, you know, "we know best", and I feel that's why it's taken them a while to catch up.[61]

For Taylor, while both the ECB and the FA were reluctant to assume responsibility for the women's organisations, the ECB handled the post-merger period more effectively. Its decision to retain key personnel who were involved before the merger (in this case Barbara Daniels, who had been the Chief Executive of the WCA) meant institutional knowledge carried over. By contrast, the FA's decision to replace the entire WFA Committee with men who lacked knowledge of women's football has (in Taylor's view) held back the development of women's football.

There was another important consequence of the takeover. The Women's FA was a female-dominated organisation (judging by the names of those in the minutes from clubs who attended meetings), and while it was always chaired by a man, between 1972 and 1993 the gender split of WFA officers was remarkably even, with either a fifty-fifty 3:3 ratio of male to female office-holders, or (in years where there were seven officers) a 3:4 or 4:3 split.[62] After the takeover, this changed. In all, six men and three women sat on the FA's new Women's Committee in its first year, while the FA Management Committee of the Women's Premier League was entirely male. While it is important not to automatically conflate *women's football* with *women within football*, and while we should recognise the important role that many men played in the governance of the WFA, the transfer of power from the WFA to the FA does appear to have reduced the number of women at the top levels of administration within football. Indeed by 1997, the FA Council recognised the under-representation of women as a serious issue, reporting at one Sports Council seminar that:

> Currently the Technical Department of the FA are looking at setting and revising specific targets for the women's game including women's committees on County Associations, female representation on full committees, fast tracking of female coaches and mentoring support to women in these positions.[63]

There was no sense, however, of the FA accepting that it was itself partly culpable for this state of affairs due to the way in which the takeover was implemented.

It is also worth assessing the experiences of the few women who did remain involved at the top levels of governance. In an interview for this research, Julie Hemsley relayed a telling anecdote which occurred near the start of her tenure on the FA Council:

> There was a final at Birmingham … So half time, councillors go in the board room, get their little tea and coffee. "Julie's not allowed. No women." Right? The doorman doing his job. So I go, "Okay, I'll find the wives." So I go

> round to the next room like, "What's going on?" And they're like, "Oh let them do what they do. Come and sit with us." I'm like, "Okay." So we're chatting and then suddenly the Vice-Chairman comes in and says, "We're looking for you." I'm like, "Well I'm here." "Why aren't you in there?" I said, "I was not allowed in." … But they weren't ready for it because that's how it's always done.

Julie therefore endured both symbolic and physical, spatial exclusion from important footballing spaces, purely by virtue of being a woman. She was also forced to endure being treated as the FA's 'token woman':

> JH: It was a learning process and curve. And I enjoyed it to be honest. I enjoyed chatting football. Especially when we were away in different countries. And they want to show you off. That was the funny thing, it was like, you know, "we want you with us".
>
> RN: Because, "here's our woman"?
>
> JH: Yes. Kind of. Not in so many words but that's how it felt. Like, oh I'm like a little toy you bring out of the cupboard every now and then, you know … Like, "there's a lady", you know what I mean?[64]

While Julie reflected positively on her overall experience, she also recognised the problematic nature of her role as the only woman in an otherwise all-male committee, echoing the experiences of other women who have also found themselves as 'token' women within sporting organisations.[65]

Meanwhile, what was occurring lower down the pyramid? For WFA member clubs, it was simply a case of being informed that they would need to affiliate to their local County Football Associations. These County FAs were asked by the FA to co-opt representatives of women's football onto 'appropriate committees', but there was no comeback if they did not.[66] The FA had actually debated a more prescribed approach, but eventually concluded that forcing County Associations to have a mandatory number of women's representatives 'would be politically sensitive and would probably create an adverse reaction', so it was left up to individuals to establish working relationships.[67]

While a full analysis of grassroots governance was outside the scope of this research, some women certainly felt that in the mid-1990s, the conservative male governance of local football was more prepared to listen to male voices than female ones. Sue Foulkes recalled her own experience within the Leicestershire County FA:

> I went to a lot of the conferences. You know, you always felt that when you put your hand up to say anything, there was a loud intake of breath, like, "[gasps] a woman is there to speak!" sort of moment. So, I'm not sure it was always a willingly accepted voice … But if you'd got some men involved with positions in the club or in your league, their voice had a little bit more impact than your voice did at some of the national meetings … it just felt that they were listened to better.[68]

Sue felt that male-dominated committees failed to listen to women like her, even though she had many years of experience working within women's football. Similarly, Sheila Rollinson continued to attend Derbyshire County FA meetings, but critiqued the dominance of the 'FA blazers':

> Once they took over that meant that we all affiliated to our local County FAs, and there was quite a lot of FA blazers still around at a lot of County FAs … We'd got the WFA sort of, like I say, we knew everybody in our own league. But also when we went down to the WFA you'd meet people from teams and think – you'd see the same faces because it was the same people running them. And you knew that you were pulling together against difficulties. And we kind of lost that overall feeling, and it was a bit fragmented.[69]

As this quote suggests, the takeover process had a twofold effect: firstly, it broke up the existing women's football community, who no longer gathered in the same way they had done prior to the takeover; secondly, it consolidated the existing male-dominated governance of English football.

To conclude this analysis of the environment which prevailed in the immediate post-takeover period, it would be fair to say that the FA did not utilise existing women's football expertise at this time. Some interviewees felt that this was done on purpose, as a means of more effectively imposing FA control over women's football. At both national and local levels, the voices which prevailed tended to be male; the few women who held significant roles, such as Hemsley, reported tokenistic and exclusionary treatment. It remains the case today that women are systematically under-represented within football governance in the UK: the evidence presented in this section suggests that we need to see this as one legacy of the 1993 takeover, which forced women's football to join up with men's football to the detriment of having a significant voice in governance.[70]

Merging as a Hobson's Choice

The forensic assessment of the decision by the FA to take over the WFA in 1993 offered in this article indicates just how little autonomy the WFA had in the process. Admittedly under pressure from the Sports Council, it was the FA that drove forward the 'merger', steamrollering existing women's football expertise in favour of its own people, lessening the voice of both women's football and women within football. While other sports also underwent governing body mergers during the 1990s, the WFA's position was unique: it had formally been a subsidiary organisation of the FA since 1971, meaning there was little room for opposition or bargaining once the FA decided to assume full control. The WFA attempted consultation with members, and did go through the constitutional motions, but ultimately the 'merger' truly was a *Hobson's Choice*.

Despite the fact that it took place thirty years ago, the 1993 'moment' evoked strong emotions within oral history interviews: largely frustration and disappointment at a disempowering process which continues to be publicly glossed over in favour of celebratory coverage of the recent achievements of the Lionesses. While we cannot correct the wrongs of history, we can acknowledge them. Perhaps the time is right for the FA to acknowledge the hurt caused by its 1993 takeover, and to add a more nuanced and accurate description of the 'merger' to its own website.

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