

Gordon Craigie

This month, I'm in conversation with Sheila Begbie – the former Scotland international footballer and coach who went on to be a ground-breaking administrator in both football and rugby...



Sheila Begbie

HAVING qualified for the previous two international football tournaments – the 2017 Euros in Netherlands and the 2019 World Cup in France – it was deeply disappointing when the Scotland Women's National Team (SWNT) failed to qualify for the 2022 Euros, all the more so since they're being hosted "doon the road" in England! However, the team is still well placed to qualify for the 2023 World Cup in Australia and New Zealand as they currently occupy second place in their qualifying group behind Spain, with three games left to play in 2022 against Ukraine, Spain and Faroe Islands. Exciting times, yet when Sheila Begbie was growing up in Edinburgh in the 1960s this would've seemed like a fantasy – women's football? Indeed, Scotland was, literally, the last "man" standing in opposition to women's football – when the sport's European governing body, UEFA, instructed its 32 member countries to take control of women's football in 1971 only one country voted against the instruction... aye, Scotland! The Scottish FA would finally relent and officially recognise the women's game in 1974 – better late than never, eh?

"When I was growing up in Drylaw most of the people that lived in my stair and roundabout were boys so my younger sister and I used to just join in all the games with them. We'd play football and cricket and there was a huge field at the back of our housing estate which we used as a golf course! So we played loads of different sports and were quite well accepted just as part of the gang in terms of playing. I started to play football probably from the age of 6 or 7 – my sister played too but gave up when she got really interested in music and started to play the oboe. I continued on the sporting side of things but, if I'm being honest, I never really thought that playing football in a team would be an opportunity for me because I didn't know that there was any women's football that was happening in Scotland.



An independent mind...



An interesting choice of outfits to promote the game against Italy in Milan! Back row, L to R: Helen Layden, Diane McLaren, Yvonne Carmouche, Elisabeth Smith, Wendy McDonald, Margaret Wilson, Sheila Begbie, Maria Blagojevic, Elsie Cook. Front row, L-R: Elisabeth Ure, June Hunter, Edna Nellis, Mary Strain, Eleanor Vinesky, Sheila Beveridge, Mary Carr, Margaret McAuley

"I remember watching the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico and getting really interested in athletes like Lillian Board. So, as well as playing football, when I was about 11 or 12 I started to focus a little bit more on athletics as well and joined Edinburgh Athletic Club. Then, one day when I was coming home on the bus from Craigroyston High School, I sat down beside Jane Leggett, a girl in the same year as me who just lived 10 minutes up the road from us. We were talking about what we were doing at the weekend and she said she was going to play football with this club called Edinburgh Dynamos – I was like, 'oh my God, are there women's football teams?' Anyway, the upshot was that I ended up going along to training with Jane, who became one of my best friends, and that was how I started playing for Edinburgh Dynamos when I was 13 years old."

Women's football, even in Scotland, wasn't a new thing of course, it just wasn't officially recognised or supported until the 1970s. In fact, the first recorded international match for women was held at Hibernian's Easter Road stadium in 1881, with Scotland beating England 3-0. The story of that game is fascinating and can be read in full at tinyurl.com/iscotSWNT. It would be another 91 years however for the first "official" game between Scotland and England,

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when England won 3-2 at the Ravenscraig Stadium in Greenock in 1972, and even that was only made truly official by the Scottish FA belatedly recognising the game and awarding caps to the players in 2019 – again, better late than never! Although the Scottish FA were unmoved by that previously-mentioned UEFA vote in 1971 they were powerless to prevent the arrival of the Scottish Women's FA the following year, and the newly-formed body immediately organised their first league competition, initially involving six teams: Aberdeen Prima Donnas, Cambuslang Hooverettes, Dundee Strikers, Edinburgh Dynamos, Westthorn United and Stewarton Thistle. Along with the international match in Greenock, this was a strong statement that women's football in Scotland was gaining momentum again. That all of this was coming together just as Sheila was "coming of age" seems almost serendipitous in hindsight.



Nae removals van needed for the SWNT en route to the World Cup in France in 2019!

"The Dynamos used to train at Muirhouse, which was close to Craigoyston, and then we played on a Sunday on Silverknowes. We would play home and away league fixtures every Sunday, and in the Scottish Cup too. At the same time I was still running for Edinburgh Athletic Club, specialising in the 100m and 200m sprints. I was the club champion and in the winter I used to go to Pitreavie and do all the cross-country too – I didn't really enjoy that all that much, but I went along and competed! One day when I got home from school I found out that my athletics coach, who was also the local postman, had popped in to see my mum and dad to say, 'don't let her play football, she should stick with athletics because she's at least Commonwealth Games standard and maybe more if she works hard'. My dad tried to convince me to continue with athletics and give up football, but I was really quite determined that football was the route I wanted to follow because I just loved playing.

"We later played at Davidsons Mains, on a nice little pitch in a bit of a bowl surrounded by hills. There were no changing rooms so we got changed in the groundsman's hut along with the line-painting machines and lawnmowers and lots of oil and grease and dirt and muck! There was only one shower and it was absolutely freezing cold so, in the winter, when you'd just come off the pitch and were still warm from playing, it was a really horrible experience. Eventually we all decided just to go home to shower! But we did actually have the wherewithal to get in touch with our MP and local councillor to ask them to do something about this. The councillor took up our case and we were featured in the *Edinburgh Evening News* highlighting the fact that this women's team were playing and using the groundsman's hut to get changed in with no showering facilities or toilets. We ended up moving to Belford, but it was all good fun.

"I got my first senior cap for Scotland in 1973, when I was 15, against England

down in Nuneaton. Quite rightly we now look at youth structures but in the olden days you were just kind of lobbed in regardless of what age you were! If you were good enough you were in the team and of course it's right now that we do provide opportunities for young people but in those days there was no youth football around so we all just played in the senior game. I was a one club woman and stayed with Edinburgh Dynamos all through my playing career. It was a really fantastic club and we were incredibly successful. We won the league and Scottish Cup double 7 years in a row – [a record which stood until Glasgow City equalled it 2 years ago!] – we won the British national 5-a-side title down in Nottingham, and we had about 8 or 9 of the national team. I guess it was a lesson in terms of sustainability and maybe looking to the future in that when I retired there were a few others who also retired and the club kind of lurched on for another few years before completely folding in the mid-1980s, which was a shame. There are a number of clubs in Edinburgh now but none of them came out of what was Edinburgh Dynamos."

With her international career starting at the age of 15 there were often conflicts between Sheila's schoolwork and her footballing commitments: "When I was still at school I had to get time off to go to Italy for a couple of international tournaments. Then there was one competition in Morocco when I was sitting my Highers – I was included in the squad and I asked the school if I could get the time off and they just said, 'absolutely not!' It was pretty rotten to see some of my peers going off to Morocco for 10 days or so and they came back with lots of amazing stories about what the experience had been like. But then again the school was really good and even supported me financially because, at that time, when you were in the national team you had to pay part of your travel costs and Craigoyston helped with that. When I made my debut against England, I remember seeing the old BBC cameras on top of the grey-green van they used to have in those days and thinking, 'we've got Rose Reilly and Edna Nellis and people like that in our team'. But it was not a pleasant first-time experience as we lost 8-1 – I worked really hard that day but we still lost eight goals!"

"In the 1970s, when you went away with the national team, if you weren't training or playing you went out and sunbathed – not just for 20 minutes or so mind, some of my teammates were lying there for hours, which would be frowned on nowadays as everything is much more

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Anna Signeul with her captain Gemma Fay – Scotland's most-capped international with 203 appearances. Coincidentally, Gemma has followed Sheila's career path and is now Head of Women & Girls Strategy at Scottish Rugby!





The Scottish team celebrating a victory, with a young Sheila at the top right of the photo...



... and celebrating THAT victory against England at Downfield! L to R: Maria Blagojevic, Jane Legget, Helen Layden, Sheila Begbie and Margaret McAuley

scientific and academic in terms of what's required. One of the great anecdotes from around that time – unfortunately I wasn't actually there as I hadn't yet been selected – was from that first official women's international in 1972 against England in Greenock. On the way down, something happened to the bus so the team ended up flagging down a removals van and the guys took them down to training – the Scottish Women's National Team travelled down from Glasgow in a removals van! That sounds crazy, but that's how things were working, relying on people's goodwill to support what was happening. There were plenty of other funny things that happened during my time that I obviously can't share with you!"

Sheila played 25 times for Scotland at a time when the national team only played a handful of games each year. She captained the side "around" 20 times – "my mind is a bit fuzzy!" – including in Scotland's first-ever modern-day victory against England, winning 2-1 at Downfield Park, Dundee in 1977: "We hadn't beaten England before but when we beat them 2-1 at Downfield it was a really fantastic occasion. I was the captain and Maria Blagojevic – a really good Scottish name! – scored the winner with about 5 minutes to go. We hadn't beaten England for years and the next time would be another 34 years later in Cyprus – I was there in my role as Head of Girls' and Women's Football at the Scottish FA – when Scotland beat England 2-0. People might think it's a bit petty-minded to measure ourselves against England but they were a real powerhouse in women's football. They had a lot more investment than we had, and a lot more players to choose from, so for us to beat them that first time in Dundee was amazing and then again to beat them in the Cyprus Cup in 2011 was really brilliant."

Another career highlight for Sheila was scoring twice in a game against Italy in 1974, though she only remembers one of the goals fondly: "Scoring for Scotland at the famous San Siro stadium in Milan was quite an incredible moment. It was from a free kick and as soon as the ball left my boot I knew it was in the back of the net, I just hit it so sweetly. Unfortunately, I'd also scored a goal for Italy as well! They got a corner, it was a really slippery surface and I was standing near the front post when the ball came in and skidded off my boot into the back of the net, which was a bit awful. We lost the game 3-1."

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Perhaps unsurprisingly for someone so immersed in sport, on leaving school Sheila decided to pursue a career as a PE teacher, which meant another 4 years of studying at Dunfermline College of Physical Education. As a reminder of the employment situation in Scotland in the late 1970s and early 1980s, it's a sobering thought that when she graduated in 1981 there were only two jobs available for female PE teachers in the whole of Lothian Region. Fortunately for Sheila, she was one of the two successful candidates and started her teaching career in West Lothian. But there would still be some drama ahead as she juggled her work and football commitments: "Before I started teaching I'd been offered a couple of professional playing contracts in Italy while I was still studying – firstly when I was in second year, and then again when I was in fourth year. The club was ACF



Downfield Park, Dundee in 1977 – scene of Scotland's historic win against England

Sheila was offered a professional contract twice by the Italian club ACF Trani 80 © Nino Losito (CC BY 3.0)



The San Siro, Milan in 1974 – scene of Sheila's TWO goals!

Trani 80, which was in the south, right down in the 'heel', the club that Rose Reilly played for. [Trani won three Serie A titles and one Coppa Italia in the mid-1980s] I'm sure it would've been a great life and people like Rose were really successful in Italy. Anyway, I spoke to the education department and asked what they thought the chances were of me coming back and getting a teaching job if I went to get some experience playing professional football in Italy first – they said that it was highly unlikely! So I ended up staying and lots of people have asked me, 'do you not regret having not gone?' Well, actually, no. I'm not one of these people who look back and regret things that I've done or not done. At the end of the day, how my life and my work experience, my contribution to sport, has worked out, I'm quite happy that I stayed in Scotland."

As her playing career was coming to an end – hastened by her employers giving her an ultimatum after one injury too many was deemed to be affecting her teaching work – Sheila decided to make the move into coaching: "I was basically told that I had to choose whether I wanted to play football or be a teacher! At that time in Scotland it wasn't possible to make a living out of playing football. In fact as most sports did then, and even still today, we were all contributing to the running costs of the club on a weekly basis! So I was probably around 26 or 27 when I started to think that if I couldn't keep playing because of potential injury then maybe I could go into coaching. So I did my first coaching qualification – my C-Licence – at Craigshill in Livingston and stopped playing. I used to give one of my teaching colleagues a lift into school every morning and one day he said, 'I've seen a job that's perfect for you'. He brought the newspaper advert to the staffroom at interval and I had a look and thought, wow! The job was Women and Girls' Football Coordinator with Teamsport Scotland, a new Sport Scotland initiative that was about developing some really very specific cultural sports in

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Scotland – shinty, rugby, football, netball, volleyball, and so on. I applied and when the day came for the interview I popped into my parents' house on the way and told them I was thinking about not going for the interview because I've got a mortgage, I've got a long-term job in teaching and this is just a 4-year contract... and my dad said, 'well, there's nothing to lose in just going to see what it's like'. So I did, and when I came out of the interview I just thought, 'I really want this job!' Thankfully I was successful and, although I was employed by Sport Scotland, I was based at Park Gardens in Glasgow with the Scottish FA. It was a really fantastic experience."

"Andy Roxburgh, who had interviewed me, was just so visionary and the way he spoke about women's football in 1991 was not the way that anybody else was talking about either women's football or women's sport. He was a really progressive, transformational guy in terms of his thoughts on the game. Craig Brown was also working at the Scottish FA as Andy's assistant and so between the two of them they were really supportive. Actually, when I was still playing I remember Andy doing some sessions with the women's national team at Largs, and also at Stirling University when we were training there. He was really open and really pushing in terms of women's football. At the time, one of the things he was promoting was Soccer Sevens – small-sided games for young people – and that became almost like missionary work for people like myself going round the country trying to persuade people that this was a really good thing for younger players.

"In 1995 my contract was extended after a review of the project and what the impact had been on sport in general. Women's football had fared really well but then when I had started in 1991 we had almost a blank canvas – there was only a handful of women's teams, something like 23 qualified women coaches on the Scottish FA database and there were no youth competitions – so I had a low starting point to work from. I really worked hard to try and join all the dots and make sure that we were collaborative and were trying to build networks to support the development of the women and girls' game. Then, in 1998, the Scottish FA appointed the former Dutch international player Vera Pauw as SWNT coach and I became an Assistant Director with responsibility for strategy and policy. We also got a full-time administrator in – previously Maureen McGonigle had been part-time football, part-time wrestling, from a cupboard in the Kelvin Hall! I think that was a great starting point for us as well – the work that we were doing getting more girls involved, more coaches involved, more teams involved, looking at competition structures – that people then had a go-to person in terms of Maureen for administrative support or myself if it was related to strategy and policy. Vera did a lot of work that was really focussed on trying to build the profile of the national team, and quite rightly because the SWNT is the shop window of the women's game. She was there to develop the SWNT, which hadn't been terribly

Rose Reilly and Edna Nellis both went to play professionally in Italy after being banned for life by the Scottish Women's FA for protesting against the amateurism of the organisation – and Rose would go on to win the World Cup with Italy, as captain, in 1984 after gaining Italian citizenship!



successful up to that point, but her approach was really focussed exclusively on the national team and probably neglected what was happening in the club game. But Vera did make an impact, and she made the team a lot better than it was during her 6-year stint.

"When we were looking for her successor we got a recommendation from people in UEFA about this Swedish coach called Anna Signeul. I was given the go-ahead to speak to her – we were openly recruiting as well at this time but we were just being proactive in making sure we had a really good female coach as a candidate. I chatted to Anna about strategy for about 8 hours one day and realised that her philosophy was quite different to Vera's. Of course, the national team was still really important but she believed we couldn't develop the national team in isolation to the club game. We needed to make the club game in Scotland better so we needed to make the coaches better, we needed to support the coaches and the players more, and we needed to look at the competition structure – what's the best structure, when's the best time to play – because in the winter we were having lots of cancelled games. So Anna came with a really different approach, which I really liked, and we started to do a lot more work with the clubs. And not just looking at the playing and coaching side but also at like how do the clubs develop, how do they link themselves to schools and universities, how do they market themselves, how do they use social media – it was a really joined-up approach to how we worked with clubs. I have to say, the volunteers in the women's clubs were absolutely outstanding.

"It was a brilliant structure to work with and was really inclusive in terms of recognising that the clubs are the heartbeat of the game. It doesn't matter what you do internationally, if you don't have a good competition structure in your country then you're never going to be successful because, at that point, that was where most of our players were playing, in Scotland. We did get to a point where, of course, there became a little bit of a conflict because if we really wanted to go even higher and take Scotland to a finals tournament our best players had to be playing in the best leagues in the world. So we had Kim Little and players like that playing down in England and we had players in Sweden, France and USA. We started to see some of the best players going abroad which gave opportunities for other younger players to step up. It felt like a really good time in the women's game, with a real connectedness between what was happening at the Scottish FA and what was happening in the club game. We had really good relationships with individuals within the clubs because it was about 'we' and it wasn't about us and them. Quite early on Anna and I created a 12-year

Rose Reilly with the World Cup in 1984



strategy, and within that strategy we said that the first tournament that our SWNT would qualify for would be the women's Euros in 2017 in Netherlands, and they did that!"

In 2014, Sheila made what looked like a somewhat strange decision for someone who had achieved such legendary status within Scottish football circles when she switched sports to become Director of Rugby Development at Scottish Rugby: "I had achieved a lot in football, I was working really long hours, long days, a lot of weekends, and I felt that I just wanted a bit of a change. I was also thinking that in the next 10 years or whatever I might want to start thinking about retirement so maybe I needed to look and see if there's something I wanted to do before I stopped working. Then one day, one of my colleagues at the Scottish FA asked me if I'd seen the job at Scottish Rugby. I read the advert and it was almost the same job description that I was doing in football! So I applied and – déjà vu – just thought, 'well, I'll go along and see what it's like'. Anyway, I really liked what I heard at the interviews, the organisation were really up for developing their women's programme, and really supportive of what they wanted to do within their women's programme. The Head of HR, Julie Gemmell, was fantastic and really sold Scottish Rugby to me. When they offered me the job I did kind of hum and haw and think, 'oh my God, it's almost like leaving behind your baby, your child that you've been working on or been involved with for all those years of your life. But when I spoke to friends they told me to go for it, just give it a chance, so I did and I'm really glad that I did."

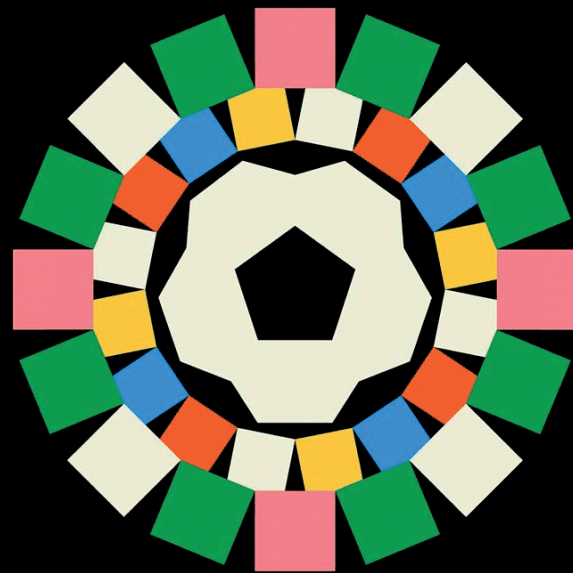
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"Also, I'd been ploughing the M8 since 1991, backwards and forwards every day, which was adding 4 or 5 hours to my day depending on what time I left in the morning or came back at night and it was just getting a bit tiring. The opportunity to work in Edinburgh actually became very attractive to me even just in terms of getting 5 hours of my day back every day – that's 25 hours a week! And Scottish Rugby was a fantastic

place to work. I created a strategy for the women and girls' game where, like we did in football, I was trying to join up the club game and the national team and that was where we first started talking about 'you can't be what you can't see' and using all of that. The Chief Executive, Mark Dodson, started to use that as well in some of the work that he was doing and then we were having conversations not just about what I was initially doing but about the organisation and about how actually we needed more leaders at the highest level within the organisation. I guess it was being able to influence some of the other things that were happening in rugby, not just in the women and girls' game, but also feeling valued and that people respected what I was saying, that was really important for me as well. It was a great place to work."

Having succeeded at the top level in three separate careers – and being awarded an MBE for services to women's football in 2001 – how does Sheila look back on her achievements? "When I started at the Scottish FA in 1991 there was hardly anything happening in the women's game in Scotland and when I left we had plans about developing the clubs, we had a good strong club base, we'd started to have success with the national team, there was an infrastructure there that included a national academy, national camps for younger people, a lot more female coaches, and we had a lot more male coaches that we had developed who were working in the women's game as well. There's something like 25 people who are working professionally now in women's football in Scotland, England and across the world who have come through the programmes that Anna and myself developed and delivered. So it went from a standing start to being something quite big. For me, having been in at the beginning and starting to make the plans and putting the structure and the infrastructure in place and to see where the game is now, I think it's fantastic. About 10 years ago we were looking at where the game would be and we talked about the women's team qualifying for 2017, the number that we talked about was we'd have 12,000 registered players, all of these things have come to fruition. In rugby, my only regret is the pandemic! If that hadn't started then I think it would've given us a really great opportunity of making big, big changes in the club game and the domestic game in Scotland. They will still happen, but just a couple of years later than they maybe would've, and I would've loved it to happen in my tenure but I've been there and put the plans in and hopefully the plans will still continue. I'd love to see success in rugby, it's a fantastic sport, it's a great organisation and, like football, there are

The 2023 World Cup will be held in Australia and New Zealand



FIFA
WOMEN'S
WORLD CUP



AU **20**
NZ **23**

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The women's national teams in both football and rugby continue to grow in stature reflecting the increased participation and higher standards in the respective club games that are directly attributable to the groundwork she put in place

just some really amazing people that are volunteering in the game and working in the game.

"I'm content that I did a bit of pioneering work in terms of developing structures and infrastructures for the women's game here in Scotland, in both football and rugby. I retired last summer so I'm just enjoying winding down a wee bit and taking some time out for reflection. I'm going to catch up with people, have a bit of a holiday, then there's a couple of opportunities that I'm just going to wait and see what happens. I will look for something to do because I'm not finished yet, I still have something to offer, probably still in sport. I was a non-exec director at Scottish Rugby and I did some non-exec training with one of the universities so I've got that experience as well. Maybe sometime next year."

When Sheila Begbie left the Scottish FA to join Scottish Rugby in 2014 my immediate thought was that football's loss was rugby's gain. I'll happily declare an interest here – I had the privilege of working closely with Sheila in a coaching capacity at international level a few years back and know first-hand how thoroughly professional, innovative and resourceful she is as well as being a kind and caring individual. I'm sure we've not seen her last involvement in Scottish sport, and we're still seeing the fruits of her labour as the women's national teams in both football and rugby continue to grow in stature reflecting the increased participation and higher standards in the respective club games that are directly attributable to the groundwork she put in place. As we head into 2022, and a new period of hope and expectation within our nation, there are so many aspects of Scottish political and cultural life that would benefit from that kind of expertise.