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**WOMEN'S '20
FOOTBALL
WEEKEND**

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Major Setback or New Dawn?

Jacquie Agnew of Pro Talent Sports discusses the impact of COVID-19 on the game



COVID-19 has been the biggest disruption to women's football in England since World War 1, which grew and propelled the women's game to centre-stage and began its chequered history. Will the coronavirus pandemic usher in an era of big change too or will the experience push the sport back to the sidelines from which it was emerging?

All games stopped on 14 March, and it was only after 25 weeks out of action that The Football Association decided to let Tier 1 and 2 matches restart on the 5 September, with the new league season and the final rounds of the postponed 2019/2020 Vitality Women's FA Women's Cup. By contrast, the men resumed playing on the 17 June with considerable investment in making both the Premier

League and Emirates FA Cup matches safe for those participating.

The forced break for the women's elite game has presented many challenges and a good deal of uncertainty, but also an opportunity to take stock of its rising trajectory and look for further growth and improvement. If the last few weeks have demonstrated anything, it is just how resilient and engaging the game is.

At the heart of the industry are the players, who will be central to the next phase of development.

Fans of women's football are renowned for their closeness to the teams they follow. This accessibility, and engagement with players is a feature of the women's game and will sustain audience viewing. For the time being, with attendance at games largely absent, viewing demand is being met in part by the BBC Red Button, FA Player and the streaming of games by those clubs who have tapped into this type of media. The potential exists for much greater visibility, and much greater consequent commercial appeal.

Elite players can play a massive part in growing the game and achieving its potential by ensuring fans remain connected and ready to participate. Strong personalities, who can engage with the audience and influence others, will drive relevance and the love for the game.

Audiences have not disappeared, and fans' appetite for watching live sport has not been lost. Some fans of the top-level women's game have got their weekly fix by going to watch matches at Tier 3 level, and it would be fair to say they have not been disappointed.

Clubs can work to develop their fanbase, and access new support in their communities - not

only helping ensure financial stability but providing a basis for growth in the three primary income streams: TV broadcasting, commercial sponsorship and matchday revenue. Post-COVID, there will be a lot of pent-up demand to go and watch live games again, so now is the time for clubs to review and look for new ways to make their matchday experience glow.



Photo by James Boyes

Evidence of growing commercial appeal has been found during the pandemic, with The Football Association actively selling TV broadcasting rights to Barclays FA Women's Super League games for the first time - and seeing plenty of interest. Vitality, the health and insurance company, have also signed a record three-year sponsorship deal for the FA Women's Cup.

This commercial appeal has been further boosted by the signings of high-profile foreign players by Barclays FA Women's Super League clubs – now shining a spotlight on the quality of women's football, already high. The pandemic has encouraged a spread of this quality; most women's clubs have reviewed how they spend their budgets, and many have opted to bring in younger internationals – giving them a chance to play on a bigger stage. Not all of the upheaval has been good news for individual elite players - some have been displaced to Tier 3 – but in turn, this has made this level more competitive. The clear spread of top playing quality could allow an expansion of the top two tiers to a total of 28 teams, up from 23.

For now, the emphasis is on making the most of the current season. It was encouraging to see investment going into player testing at the top levels to get the 2020/2021 season underway. It looks likely to continue, and The Football Association and clubs will have to find a way through the challenges of rescheduling fixtures thrown off-course by quarantining requirements.

Regarding their health, players have already demonstrated they can respond with agility. For example, during the absence of competition, they had to take ownership of their personal fitness programmes to maintain their physical condition. This must have felt like post-injury training - in isolation and without teammates - but for many the new responsibility called up reserves of motivation and encouraged self-reliance. Some have even enhanced their fitness levels.

Given the place of football in the nation's heart, and in local communities, it is hard to conclude that the next phase of the women's game will go backwards. The pandemic has been a shock, but it has forced all those involved to find ways to build back better. We should expect a stronger, more vibrant industry to emerge.

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