

Women's football analysis: a comparison of five major leagues

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1. Introduction

Women's football is currently undergoing a welcome development. At the elite level, the process of professionalisation is well underway in several countries worldwide. Following in the footsteps of the CIES Football Observatory studies, this report analyses the composition of squads in five of the world's most developed leagues: four European (Frauen Bundesliga in Germany, Damallsvenskan in Sweden, Division 1 féminine in France and Women's Super League in England), as well as the Women's National Soccer League in the United States.

The study investigates the criteria of age, origin and international status of players. For statistics at squad level, we have taken into account the players fielded or having been on the bench at least once during championship matches of the current season up until the 1st of June 2017. The on-pitch data were calculated by taking into account the playing time of each footballer.

2. Age of players

The 1,251 footballers taken into account were 24.1 years of age, on average, on the 1st June 2017. This is a relatively young age and reflects the difficulty for many women to earn sufficiently high and competitive revenues so as to pursue a long-term career in football. From this point of view, the economic development of the top level championships should lead to a progressive increase in the average age of players.

The American's Women's National Soccer League (NWSL) comprises the oldest players in terms of squads (25.7 years of age), as well as on the pitch (26.2 years of age). The only championship where the average age of squads is greater than that on the pitch is the English Women's Super League (WSL): 24.2 as opposed to 23.9 years of age. In total, the first value is, on average, one year lower than the second, with a maximum gap for Damallsvenskan (1.7 years).

The average age on the pitch varies strongly according to club. The gap between the youngest and oldest team by league is great everywhere except for the United States (2.6 years). The longer history of professionalism in the latter country most likely explains the presence of a higher number of more seasoned players throughout the teams. The club having fielded the oldest line-ups is Rosengård (28.5 years of age).

Figure 1: players' age in squads and on the pitch

	In squads	On the pitch
NWSL (USA)	25.7	26.2
Frauen Bundesliga (GER)	24.0	25.5
Damallsvenskan (SWE)	23.5	25.2
Division 1 féminine (FRA)	23.5	24.7
WSL (ENG)	24.2	23.9
Total	24.1	25.1

Figure 2: age on the pitch, minimum and maximum by club and league

	Min	Max
ENG Yeovil Town	21.1	Reading 26.1
FRA Bordeaux	22.9	PSG 27.2
GER Freiburg	23.6	Wolfsburg 27.5
SWE Göteborg	22.5	Rosengård 28.5
USA Sky Blue	25.2	Seattle Reign 27.8

3. The expatriate presence

Women's football is generating more and more international movements. On the 1st June 2017, 274 footballers were expatriated in the 55 clubs analysed (5.1 per team). The notion of expatriate refers to footballers playing outside of the association in which they started playing football, from where they departed following recruitment by a foreign club. The proportion of expatriates in squads is at least one-fifth in all leagues except the French one.

In all the championships, the relative presence of expatriate players is greater on the pitch than in squads. This reflects the greater playing time for footballers imported from abroad. This gap is particularly noteworthy in the Damallsvenskan and the Women's National Soccer League. In total, expatriates represent 22.3% of squads and play 26.3% of minutes. In the two cases, the highest values were recorded in the German Frauen Bundesliga.

Only 5 clubs out of the 55 analysed did not field expatriate players: Hammarby in Sweden, Rodez, St Étienne and Soyaux in France, as well as the Chicago Red Stars in the United States. At the other end of the scale, expatriates played a majority of minutes in five teams: SC Sand, Bayern Munich and Wolfsburg in Germany, as well as Rosengård and Vittsjö in Sweden. The high percentage measured for Yeovil Town is explained by the large presence of Welsh players.

Canada is the main exporter of footballers to the leagues surveyed in this report. On the 1st June 2017, out the 23 Canadians in the championships studies, 11 played in the American's National Women's Soccer League. Americans (22 players, 10 in Sweden) and Dutch footballers (22 expatriates mainly in Germany and Sweden) were also very well represented.

In total, 47 associations have expatriates in the leagues analysed. Today, no continent remains on the fringes of development of women's football worldwide. The Frauen Bundesliga attracts the biggest number of origins: 30. In the other leagues of the sample, this value varies between 12 (England) and 21 (Sweden).

Figure 3: % of expatriates in squads and on the pitch

	In squads	On the pitch
Frauen Bundesliga (GER)	28.0	32.7
Damallsvenskan (SWE)	22.4	31.9
NWSL (USA)	23.6	31.1
WSL (ENG)	25.4	28.5
Division 1 féminine (FRA)	14.1	16.2
Total	22.3	26.3

Figure 4: % of expatriates on the pitch, minimum and maximum by club and league

	Min	Max
ENG	Birmingham City 14.2%	Yeovil Town 45.1%
FRA	Rodez, Soyaux, Saint-Étienne 0.0%	PSG 48.1%
GER	SGS Essen 5.9%	SC Sand 69.4%
SWE	Hammarby 0.0%	Rosengård 57.5%
USA	Chicago Red Stars 0.0%	Houston Dash 45.7%

Figure 5: origin of expatriates

League	Expats	Origins	Top origin
GER	84	30	Austria [14]
SWE	55	21	USA [10]
USA	46	16	Canada [11]
ENG	45	12	Wales [13]
FRA	44	20	USA & Canada [5]
Total	274	47	Canada [23]

4. Internationals

One third of the teams studied are made up of footballers who have already played in national A-teams. This proportion is over a quarter for all of the championships. It reaches 39.9% in the English WSL on account of the presence of numerous internationals of other United Kingdom nations. Internationals play a majority of minutes in two championships: the NWSL and the Frauen Bundesliga.

The most successful women's teams field almost exclusively players with international status. The highest values in absolute were measured at Olympique Lyonnais (97.7%) and Wolfsburg (97.4%). Full internationals also played more than 80% of match minutes at Rosengård, Bayern Munich, PSG and Eskilstuna United. At the other end of the scale, Hammarby and Bordeaux do not have any player with international experience.

Figure 6: % of internationals in squads and on the pitch

	In squads	On the pitch
NWSL (USA)	38.2	52.3
Frauen Bundesliga (GER)	39.0	52.1
WSL (ENG)	39.9	47.7
Damallsvenskan (SWE)	28.0	41.8
Division 1 féminine (FRA)	25.6	34.8
Total	33.5	44.5

Figure 7: % of internationals on the pitch, minimum and maximum by club and league

	Min	Max
ENG	Sunderland 5.8%	Chelsea 72.9%
FRA	Bordeaux 0.0%	Olympique Lyonnais 97.7%
GER	Borussia M'gladbach 7.6%	Wolfsburg 97.4%
SWE	Hammarby 0.0%	Rosengård 91.2%
USA	Sky Blue 35.7%	North Carolina Courage 74.0%

5. Conclusion

The development of women's football brings with it a professionalisation of championships in a growing number of countries. This movement gives rise to numerous challenges. Although the number of players who can aspire to a professional career is on the increase, working conditions are far from homogenous. Currently, only a small number of leagues and clubs are able to offer high level professional positions.

With the advent of clubs who were hitherto only present in men's football, we observe the decline of more traditional women's football teams. The latter have more and more difficulty in gathering the resources necessary to continue to be competitive. While the general level of women's football grows, the increase in the means at the disposal of the wealthiest clubs poses a problem in terms of competitive balance.

Today, more than ever, it is necessary to reflect on the future of women's professional football. The eventual creation of international leagues bringing together teams with the most financial means at their disposal could allow the best footballers to play in an even more favourable context both from a sporting and economic standpoint. At the same time, such a development would be not be without consequences for national championships.

The regrouping of the wealthiest teams in international leagues should not in any case take place without the putting into place of just and even-handed mechanisms to compensate local teams who are active in the training of young players. The governing bodies must ensure that the sporting and economic development of women's football is not at the expense of the multiple actors having historically worked, and often struggled, so that the women's game could progress and reach its current level.