

Book Review: Female Football Players and Fans: Intruding into a Man's World edited by Gertrud Pfister and Stacey Pope

In Female Football Players and Fans: Intruding into a Man's World, editors Gertrud Pfister and Stacey Pope offers a collection that examines women's experiences of playing and being fans of the beautiful game. While she would have welcomed analysis of the situation in a wider array of European countries, Katharine Jones praises this as an intriguing volume that will inspire new conversations about women's football and women fans.

***Female Football Players and Fans: Intruding into a Man's World*. Gertrud Pfister and Stacey Pope (eds). Palgrave. 2018.**

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What are women's experiences of both playing football and being football fans? These are questions at the heart of the new volume, *Female Football Players and Fans*, edited by Gertrud Pfister and Stacey Pope. The subtitle, 'Intruding into a Man's World', reminds us that football is still seen as overwhelmingly male. Although historically the sport has been watched and played by women all over the world, women are currently a minority of players and fans—and their participation is still not taken seriously in most corners of the globe.

The book is an edited collection that covers an array of research and topics, and claims to be one of the few books that examines women's experiences of playing and being fans of the beautiful game. Regarding players, some chapters uncover histories of women's football, illustrating how its popularity was often its undoing. In both England and Germany, women's football was considered too much of a threat to the men's game, and both Football Associations (FAs) used financial excuses to shut it down. We learn in Markwart Herzog's chapter about the German arguments against women playing football in the 1950s—it was dangerous to 'fertility, pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding' (57)! Such sexist rationales seem like ancient history until we read Pope's more recent data showing that some English women fans of the men's game perceive women's football as uninteresting, 'funny', 'odd' and 'silly' (143). Since Pope conducted her interviews, the English FA Women's Super League was formed, and so we can only hope that some of these sentiments are now out of date.



In all, the chapters on women players form a useful resource for those studying women's football. For instance, Jo Welford's chapter focuses on the costs and benefits of integrating women and men's clubs in England, while Marie-Luise Klein provides an overview of attendance, budgets, salaries, regulations and the format of women's leagues around Europe. Sheila Scraton et al's 1999 interviews with ten European women players find that they struggle with the lack of respect paid to the women's game and the ways their own 'tomboy' behaviour ensures that they 'reinforce and reproduce, rather than challenge, the power relations between male/female and binary oppositions of masculine/feminine and men's sport/women's sport' (28).

The chapters on fandom illustrate the relevance of previous research on women football players and fans (for example Carrie Dunn's *Female Football Fans*, Victoria Gosling's essay 'Girls Allowed?', [my article](#), Stacey Pope's *The Feminization of Sports Fandom* and Kim Toffoletti's *Women Sport Fans*). The findings of earlier research are confirmed in this book: women are denigrated as fans by men; they look down on each other when heterosexualised femininity becomes too obvious; many buy into the idea that men's football is superior to women's football; and women seem to want to blend in with male fans. Although football is becoming more 'feminised' in the numbers of fans and players (as Pope's earlier book points out), John Williams and Pope's excellent chapter on women fans between the late 1940s and early 1960s is a corrective to the idea that women have only recently become fans, and a reminder that blaming women for the current changes in the game is misguided and misogynist.



Image Credit: Arsenal Ladies vs Notts County, 2015 ([joshjdss CC BY 2.0](#))

However, women fans themselves continue to construct masculine football practices as hegemonic. Indeed, the book shows that women fans often do not consider themselves feminists, even when they note their exclusion from men's spaces and create women-only spaces like *peñas* in Spain (Ramón Llopos-Goig and Helena Flores), or women-only buses in Sweden to practise their fandom (Aage Radmann and Susanna Hedenborg). Football is not the only arena where women tend to express feminist ideals of equality and justice, but then claim not to be feminists (and not to enjoy women's sport!). However, the contributors could have spent more time on current feminist theories of sport, particularly on the neoliberal agendas which draw on feminist ideals to appeal to an individualist, empowered, allegedly 'post-feminist' woman (for example, as found in [Toffoletti's](#) work).

Students of football fandom will enjoy the intriguing questions raised by the book, even though the authors are not always able to answer them. The in-depth interviews of Danish (Verena Lenneis and Pfister) and Swedish fans (Radmann and Hedenborg) provide important information that could be followed up in further studies. For instance, given that one of the latter's respondents broke a man's nose to prove her fan credentials, to what extent do women engage in violence in fan groups to ensure that they are accepted? Also, when do women do fandom by eschewing femininity, and trying to become 'one of the lads'? How much freedom does football fandom provide women who feel constrained by femininity, so they can swear, drink beer and shout?

One of the most interesting contributions is the final chapter which provides an overview of female fandom from 1996 to 2014 using interview data (Cornell Sandvoss and Emily Ball). We need longitudinal research into women's fandom, but the evidence here is somewhat thin given that the sample of 48 is stretched over an eighteen-year period. However, Sandvoss and Ball situate female fandom in the UK and Germany within the changing dynamics of football as it became more widely available on television and the radio, and later on social media. The authors use this literature on the transformations of leisure and media studies to illustrate how women have inserted themselves into football fandom in the West. In addition, using Judith Butler's notion of performativity and object relations theory, they note that fandom and gender are both done by imitating and copying. Other scholars (myself included) have pointed to the connections between constructions of gender and constructions of fandom—[Anne Cunningham Osborne and Danielle Sarver Coombes](#) even developing the term 'Performative Sports Fandom'—but this is important theory that needs to be reiterated if we are to truly understand gender and fandom.

Female Football Players and Fans is part of the Palgrave Macmillan series of 'Football Research in an Enlarged Europe' (FREE), and it could have benefited from more thought about the European project. Pfister asks in a reprinted chapter whether football create a sense of Europeanness through its transnational nature. However, this intriguing question is not addressed by the book. Most of the studies are firmly situated in the pre-2004 European Union, particularly in Scandinavia, the UK, Germany and Spain. The book would have been strengthened by examining female fandom and players in the 'Enlarged Europe', in addition to the places where much of the European work on female fandom has already focused.

The book also suffers from some theoretical and methodological concerns: sometimes citations of important theories are simply missing—perhaps because of a mismatch between English language scholarship and that of non-Anglophone European countries. Without robust theoretical frameworks, the small sample sizes become more obvious—and with them, a lack of generalisability. In addition, the researchers' positionality is not acknowledged. As an interviewer myself, I know that I and the respondents have 'co-created' the knowledge in my interview transcripts. I would have liked to have seen more reflexivity on the part of these scholars to account for the inevitable biases that are produced when they interview fans and football players.

Regardless of these critiques, Pfister and Pope have drawn together an intriguing collection of scholarship that continues the conversation about women's football and women fans. Their work will surely generate more research about this important topic.

Katharine Jones is an Associate Professor of Sociology and Gender Studies at Thomas Jefferson University in Philadelphia, PA. Her current research interests are the intersections of gender, race, class and sexuality, as applied to English football fans; autoethnographies of mindfulness, the body and illness; and feminist methodologies. She has published on the accents and identity negotiations of white English immigrants in the US in her book [Accent on Privilege](#) (Temple University Press, 2001), and women's responses to sexism and homophobia at English football matches.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.