

Part of the Game: The First Fifty Years of Women's Football in Ireland and the International Context

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Abstract

Women's football in Ireland started in 1895, when the British Ladies' Football Club (BLFC) visited Belfast for the first time, and was followed by a tour the next year, which included some matches labelled 'Ireland vs. England'. After two decades of silence, World War I saw the restart of women's football, thanks to Mrs Walter Scott, and this time it was played seriously. Right from the start, the focus was not only on local exhibition matches but also on international selective matches. On Boxing Day in 1917, women's football history was written, with the first international match of two selected teams in Belfast. After the war, Ireland became part of the international women's football boom, played several international matches and had close ties to the French Federation. After some years of decline, the 1930s saw the most flourishing years in Irish women's football before World War II, culminating in the first Irish full international in France, against France, in 1936. After the war, Irish women's football was back on the international scene again. In this piece I will show that Ireland—like France, Belgium, Austria and England—was one of the key international players in women's football history up to the early 1950s. As soon as serious football was played by women, starting in World War I, the Irish ladies were part of the international movement and played international selective matches. This distinguished them from other nations in the 20s and 30s, where women's football was seen as a show-act and not as a serious sport.

Keywords: Women's sports history; Women's football; Irish women's football; Interwar period; International sports; Belfast

Introduction

Women's football is still generally thought to be a quite recent development. However, this is as seen from the perspective of the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA), who only started recognising women's football in 1971. But women played football since 1881, and even had some kind of propagandistic success with the matches of the British Ladies' Football Club (BLFC) between 1895 and 1903. Two tours led the British Ladies' team to Ireland, in the spring of 1895 and spring/summer of 1896.

Ireland has been, until recently, only mentioned as a marginal note in the early history of women's football—the notable exception is Helena Byrne's recent article 'Where Are We

Now?',¹ which summarises the state of knowledge on that subject in 2019. Gail Newsham provides some information on the Dick, Kerr Ladies matches against Irish teams,² but this has proved to not be very reliable. Jean Williams has covered many of the international developments of women's football, but Ireland did not feature much in this research before the 1960s. Patrick Brennan's research on the BLFC and women's football during World War I also includes highly valuable information on Ireland. Women in Ireland played an important role in early women's football history, and had a vivid women's football scene, mainly in Northern Ireland but also at times in the Free State.³

After the tours of the BLFC in 1895 and 1896, which have been researched by Stuart Gibbs⁴ and by the author, there was a gap of twenty-one years before women's football came back to Ireland. In these years, there were occasional matches here and there, like a five-a-side match during the annual school fête in Balteagh in 1905 and a very special match during the Imperial International Exhibition in London in 1909, where the 'Girls of the Irish village' played their counterparts of the Scottish village at the White City Stadium and won 1–0.⁵

The World War I Boom

During World War I, women's football began to flourish on the British Isles, in Ireland, Canada, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand as most of the male competitions were suspended and women's football became a substitute which drew big crowds. The matches played by women were played for charity, which might explain the big crowds. The teams were composed of female factory workers, who were called 'Munionettes' in the munition factories.⁶

What was possibly the first women's match played in Ireland during the war, held on 18 March 1917, did not create too much of a sensation. It was played for a soldiers' fund and organised by the Bangor Hockey Club, so we can presume that most, if not all, of the players on the Bangor side were hockey players. Bangor beat their opponents, the Ulster Ladies' team, by two goals to one.⁷ Six months later, the Belfast newspapers announced a women's football

¹ Helena Byrne, 'Where are we now? A review of research on the history of women's soccer in Ireland', *Sport in History* (2019). doi: 10.1080/17460263.2019.1604422

² Gail Newsham, *In a League of Their Own! The Dick, Kerr Ladies 1917-1965* (Paragon, 2018).

³ The second tour of 1896 was longer than previously thought. It started with the match on 16 May 1896 in Dublin and went on for more than one month with the last match been found on 22 June in Wexford. There was at least one Irish woman in the squad (Miss Baldwin, Belfast). The author's research verifies eleven matches with the possibility of more still not known. Gail Newsham claims that Dick, Kerr's played a match in Belfast against a Northern Irish Selection in 1925 (Newsham, *In a League*, 144-145). In fact, the match in Belfast was played versus Fémina Sport, and the match against Northern Ireland to which Newsham refers was the 1931 match. For tours see Patrick Brennan, 'Women's Football' www.donmouth.co.uk/womens_football/blfc.html; 'Women's Internationals', www.donmouth.co.uk/womens_football/womns-internationals.html (accessed 1 September 2020). For more on tours see Helena Byrne, 'Where Are We Now?', 8. For recent developments in women's football in Ireland see Ann Bourke, 'Women's Football in the Republic of Ireland: Past Events and Future Prospects' in *Soccer, Women, Sexual Liberation*, eds. Fan Hong and J.A. Mangan (London/Portland: Frank Cass Publishers, 2004): 162–181.

⁴ See Stuart Gibbs, 'When Women's Football Came to the Island' in this issue.

⁵ 'Church of Ireland', *Londonderry Sentinel*, 22 June 1905, 2. 'Sports at the White City', *Sportsmen*, 10 September 1909, 6. 'Sport at the White City', *Sportsmen*, 13 September 1909, 3. 'Girls' Football Match at the White City', *Western Mail*, 13 September 1909, 7. 'Girls' Football Match', *Nottingham Daily Mail*, 13 September 1909, 6.

⁶ For the Munionettes see Patrick Brennan, *The Munionettes* (Rowlands Gill: Donmouth Publishing, 2007). On the development of women's football 1914–1921, see Jean Williams, *A Beautiful Game: International Perspectives on Women's Football* (Oxford: Berg, 2007), 119-122.

⁷ 'Tit-Bits of Sport', *Irish Independent*, 19 March 1917, 5. 'Chit Chat', *County Herald and County Down Independent*, 23 March 1917, 2. 'Ulster Volunteer Force Hospital and Limbless & Orthopaedic Branch – Second List', *Belfast Newsletter*, 6 April 1917, 8. 'War Fund Appeal', *Northern Whig*, 6 April 1917, 4.

match at Grosvenor Park, with two teams called Whites and Stripes. It was organised by the Footballers Guild, with the driving force behind its organisation being Mrs Walter Scott, the wife of the Distillery Football Club's secretary Walter Scott. The match was a tremendous success. Sixteen thousand spectators saw the match, which was the highest attendance for the period covered in this research. The referee was the Belfast Celtic star and Irish international player Michael 'Mickey' Hamill, who also participated in the rematch. The proceeds were 282 pounds, raised for the Belfast Sailors' and Soldiers' Service Club. The girls had trained for six weeks under the guidance of Walter Scott and Distillery player John Connor, and gave quite an entertaining exhibition. The result was a goalless draw, so both teams met again the following week. Again, the people came in the thousands, and this time the Whites ran out as winners, scoring three goals to the Stripes' zero.⁸

These two matches caused the first boom in women's football in the north of Ireland, mainly in Belfast, Lurgan and Portadown. Mrs Walter Scott became a leading figure and soon teams were founded in Lurgan and Portadown. These teams played on a regular basis against each other, in addition to occasional matches of a less serious manner, like the match of the Belfast Whites against a team of naval men. The Whites played with sixteen players, including two goalkeepers, while the Naval Men had their legs tied together. The five thousand spectators at Grosvenor surely had their fun.⁹

The female footballers were treated with the utmost respect, as they were playing for a good cause and, as we can see in the newspaper reports, everyone recognised how seriously they played the game. Mrs Walter Scott was highly respected and her requests to get a ground for a match were never turned down. Critical voices were the exception, but some match reports had an ironic tone, doubting, for instance, that the popularity would last long, as a reporter of the Portadown News stated: 'the popularity [of women's football in Portadown] will be as short lived as the harem's skirt'.¹⁰ Unfortunately, these critics were proved right.

What sounds unbelievable today became reality on Boxing Day in 1917, when an Irish national selection—consisting only of players from Belfast and Lurgan—played a 'Munitionettes Selection' from Northern England in Belfast, only three and a half months after the first proper match. This, again, proves, how active and successful Mrs Walter Scott was.

This first international match on Irish soil was favoured by fine weather and another big crowd of twelve thousand at Grosvenor. Just a day before the match, there was report of a serious injury when Miss Hall of the Portadown team Clonavon lost several teeth in a collision with an opponent from Hamilton Robb's.¹¹ England had the more experienced team, and won on the heavy ground with four goals to one. Ruby Hall from the Lurgan Blues scored Ireland's first international goal.

⁸ 'Football Notices', *Belfast Evening Express*, 6 September 1917, 4. 'Lady Footballers Entertained', *Belfast Evening Express*, 21 September 1917, 3. 'Ladies' Football Match', *Belfast Evening Telegraph*, 6 September 1917, 5. 'Ladies' Football Match', *Belfast Evening Telegraph*, 13 September 1917, 5. 'Ladies' Match at Grosvenor Park', *Belfast Newsletter*, 8 September 1917, 2. R.M. Liddell, 'Ladies' Football Match – 7th Sept.', *Belfast Newsletter*, 12 September 1917, 6. 'Ladies' Match at Grosvenor Park', *Belfast Newsletter*, 12 September 1917, 2. 'Ladies' Match at Grosvenor Park', *Belfast Newsletter*, 15 September 1917, 2. 'Belfast Service Club', *Belfast Newsletter*, 21 September 1917, 6. 'Ladies' Match at Belfast', *Freeman's Journal*, 8 September 1917, 7. Margaret C. McCullaun, 'Ladies' Football Match', *Northern Whig*, 13 September 1917, 6. 'News in Brief', *Sport (Dublin)*, 15 September 1917, 4. 'F.A. and Ladies' Football', *Irish Independent*, 19 September 1917, 4.

⁹ 'Navy v. Lady Footballers', *Belfast Evening Telegraph*, 24 September 1917, 5. 'The Ladies-Navy Football Match', *Belfast Evening Telegraph*, 27 September 1917, 5. 'Navy and Belfast Ladies' Football Match' *Belfast Evening Telegraph*, 29 September 1917, 5. 'An Amusing Football Match', *Daily Express*, 27 September 1917, 6. 'Navy and Belfast Ladies' Football Match', *Belfast Newsletter*, 1 October 1917, 4 (this match brought in 110-115 pounds for Miss Cunningham's fund for the relief of torpedoed ship crews).

¹⁰ 'Football', *Portadown News*, 22 December 1917, 6.

¹¹ 'Football', *Portadown News*, 22 December 1917, 6. 'Football', *Portadown News* 29 December 1917, 5.

This match was not an international match by modern standards and should therefore not be counted as a full international: the English team was just a selection of the Tyne and Wear ‘Munionettes’ from northeast England. This was the case for all international matches played during World War I and for a few years afterwards. The first full international in the world is believed to have been played between Belgium and France in February 1924.¹²

Up to May 1918, matches were played by all five existing Irish teams and Portadown fielded a selection on at least two occasions. The Belfast Whites and Lurgan Blues were on equal terms, while the Portadown teams could only hold their ground when they joined forces. There were also some burlesque matches, which didn’t attract as much spectators as the regular matches, though the female and male teams tried their best to entertain the crowd with an avalanche of goals, like in the match between Portadown and men’s submarine crew, which ended in a ten to nine victory for the women. Some teams disappeared during the summer, but there was also a new team: Ewart’s, from Belfast.¹³

On 21 September 1918, female footballers from the north of Ireland came to Newcastle under the name of Ireland for a rematch that was postponed from June 1918. This time, players from all Irish teams took part, but they had to play a very strong English eleven, who fielded all their star players—like Mary Lyons, who was one of the best female footballers at that time and Winnie McKenna, also a leading player. For her it was a special game, as she was Irish but lived and played in England in South Bank, where she took part in Munionettes Cup finals in 1918 and 1919 before returning to Ireland. A bit weak in the defence, Ireland lost again, this time with two goals to Newcastle’s five. Ruby Hall scored twice, as did McKenna and Lyons for England.¹⁴

Matches soon became a rarity and when the Irish national team played a selection of military players, at the Oval on Christmas Day of 1918, it had the touch of a farewell match, as the war was over and most of the ladies’ teams ceased to exist. The reporting of the matches also changed, as the newspapers seemed to have lost their interest in women’s football. Because of this, history does not even record the result of one truly sensational 1919 match at Grosvenor; the Belfast Whites met Ewart’s, with both teams strengthened by overseas players. Mary Lyons and Winnie McKenna played for the Whites, while ‘a well-known Scottish forward’ was to play for Ewart’s. The only thing which can be found in news sources is the statement that the people from Belfast were delighted by the play of Mary Lyons.¹⁵

¹² ‘Football’, *Portadown News*, 24 November 1917, 5. ‘Ladies’ International’, *Belfast Newsletter*, 19 December 1917, 3. ‘Belfast Cup Competition’, *Belfast Newsletter*, 24 December 1917, 2. ‘Ladies’ International Match’, *Belfast Newsletter*, 25 December 1917, 2. ‘Ladies’ International Match’, *Belfast Newsletter*, 27 December 1917, 2. ‘Grand Ladies’ International Football Attraction’, *Belfast Evening Telegraph*, 20 December 1917, 2. ‘Big Holiday Draw’ *Belfast Evening Telegraph*, 24 December 1917, 1. ‘Tyneside Girls’ Success at Belfast’, *Newcastle Journal*, 27 December 1927, 3. Patrick Brennan, ‘Women’s Internationals’. For the 1924 internationals between France and Belgium see Helge Faller, *Hun tijd vooruit* (Nussdorf: Sports et la Femme, 2019), 27-39; Helge Faller, ‘*Les Footballeuses VI*’ (Nussdorf: Sports et la Femme, 2020), 82-98.

¹³ ‘Football’, *Portadown News*, 23 March 1918, 6. ‘Football’ *Portadown News*, 30 March 1918, 5. ‘Football’, *Portadown News*, 6 April 1918, 5. ‘Ladies’ Challenge Match’, *Northern Whig*, 26 August 1918, 4.

¹⁴ ‘Association Football’, *Northern Whig*, 14 September 1918, 6. ‘Association Football’, *Northern Whig*, 21 September 1918, 6. ‘Ulster Ladies’ Sprinting Success’, *Northern Whig*, 24 September 1918, 4. ‘The Portadown News’, *Portadown News*, 14 September 1918, 6. ‘Football’, *Portadown News*, 28 September 1918, 3. ‘International Munionettes Match’, *Newcastle Journal*, 23 September 1918, 7. ‘International Match and Sports at St. James’s Park’, *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 19 September 1918, 3. ‘Ladies’ International Match’, *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 21 September 1918, 3. ‘English vs. Irish Ladies’, *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 23 September 1918, 3. Patrick Brennan, ‘Women’s Internationals’.

¹⁵ ‘Association Football’, *Northern Whig*, 30 November 1918, 5. ‘Association Football’, *Northern Whig*, 21 December 1918, 5. ‘Lady Internationals vs. Military’, *Northern Whig*, 25 December 1918, 4. ‘Association Football’, *Northern Whig*, 14 April 1919, 3. ‘Association Football’, *Northern Whig*, 19 April 1919, 5.

Table 1: Women's football teams active in Ireland, 1917–1919

- **Belfast Whites (founded 1917)**
- **Lurgan Blues (founded 1917)**
- **Hamilton Robb's Portadown / Portadown Ladies (founded 1917)**
- **Clonavon Portadown (folded 1918)**
- **Bannview Portadown (folded 1918)**
- **Ewart's Belfast (founded 1918)**
- **Banbridge Ladies (founded 1918)**

The Post- World War I Years

For about one year, women's football was nearly absent from Ireland. Then France came to England to play the Dick, Kerr's Ladies team and Mrs Walter Scott got in contact with the French; France should come to Ireland after the matches against the Preston side, she suggested, to play four matches against the Irish national team over ten days in Belfast and Dublin. The Irish even played a trial match, but somehow this first full international did not happen. The French Women's Sports Association obviously did not take the offer too seriously, as there was not a word of it in the official reports of the federation's bulletin.¹⁶

A few months later Mrs Walter Scott, on behalf of the Hospital Gala Committee, again tried to organise a trip of the French national team to Ireland. This time the plans were abandoned by the Committee because of the difficulties in guaranteeing the £600 needed for the tour.¹⁷ Instead Ireland crossed the sea to play Dick, Kerr at Blackpool. Though most of the star players of wartime, including Winnie McKenna, were members of the Irish squad, they were no match for the Dick, Kerr team. When the match was over, it was not only the score of seven goals to zero that indicated the superiority of the English side, but also that the Irish goalkeeper Thorington was named the best player of her team.¹⁸

The early 1920s can be named the international period of Irish women's football. In 1921 Ireland played North East England, which was something like a revival of the two wartime internationals. This time the teams were evenly matched and the Northern Irish selection, called 'Irish Ladies', received the honour of playing at Windsor Park. Though they lost by the odd goal in five, they showed a splendid performance.¹⁹ A few weeks later, the Belfast Whites drew against the Fleetwood Ladies' Football Club (who were called 'Lancaster Ladies' in the reports), scoring one goal each before twenty thousand spectators, according to the *Fleetwood*

'Association Football', *Northern Whig*, 24 April 1919, 3. 'Association Football', *Northern Whig*, 26 April 1919, 3. 'League Meeting', *Sport* (19 April 1919), 3.

¹⁶ 'Funds for Belfast Hospitals', *Belfast Newsletter*, 1 May 1920, 6. 'Ladies' Match at Grosvenor Park', *Belfast Newsletter*, 14 May 1920, 6. 'Ladies' Match at Grosvenor Park', *Belfast Newsletter*, 15 May 1920, 9. 'The French Team to Pay Visit to Dublin', *Freemans Journal*, 15 May 1920, 7. 'French Lady Footballers', *Sport (Dublin)*, 22 May 1920, 3.

¹⁷ 'Hospitals Gala Committee', *Belfast Newsletter*, 1 July 1920, 9. 'Ladies' Football Match', *Belfast Newsletter*, 28 July 1920, 7. 'The Hospital Sports Gala', *Belfast Newsletter*, 7 August 1920, 7.

¹⁸ 'Tunstall', *Staffordshire Sentinel*, 4 October 1920, 4. 'Football', *Leeds Mercury*, 1 October 1920, 5. 'Lady Footballers', *Daily Herald*, 2 October 1920, 7. 'Pithy Pars on all Branches of Sport', *Sport* [Du], 2 October 1920, 14.

¹⁹ 'Items', *Belfast Newsletter*, 10 January 1921, 2. 'Dick, Kerr's Team of Ladies', *Belfast Newsletter*, 24 January 1921, 2. 'Items', *Belfast Newsletter*, 21 March 1921, 2. 'The Easter Holidays', *Belfast Newsletter*, 28 March 1921, 6. 'Ladies' Match in Belfast', *Belfast Newsletter*, 31 March 1921, 2. 'Irish League Meeting', *Northern Whig*, 3 March 1921, 3. 'Ladies' International', *Northern Whig*, 30 March 1921, 3. 'Ladies' Football International', *Belfast Telegraph*, 31 March 1921, 4.

Chronicle.²⁰ In June, Ireland beat a team that the newspapers called Scotland three to one—but it was, in fact, the second match of the Fleetwood Ladies' Football Club in Belfast, which was the first international victory for the Irish team.²¹ The Northern Irish newspapers announced the match as 'Ireland vs. Scotland' and the opposing team was even called Scotland in the match reports. There was a lineup given for the Scottish team, which matched the players of the east of Scotland Ladies Football Club based in Edinburgh—but it appears that the Scottish team was unable to come and Fleetwood replaced them for the match. The last international match for quite a while was played in autumn of that year when a combined Irish/Northeast England team met the Dick, Kerr's Ladies team at Windsor Park and received another heavy defeat against the then leading women's football team in the world, losing with a score of one goal to six.²²

Apart from these matches organised by Mrs Walter Scott, there were two teams—by the names of Bloomfield and Oldpark—playing on different occasions against each other. They consisted of some of the players active during the war and some new players.²³ By 1922, the news online writes indirectly of some matches and of plans for a match of France against Ireland, which never happened.²⁴ The Scottish team Dumfries received an invitation for an Ireland tour in 1924.²⁵ Plans by Fémina de Paris to go to Ireland in 1924 did not materialise,²⁶ nor did four suggested matches of a French team versus Dick, Kerr around the start of 1925.²⁷ When the French ex-champion finally came in May 1925, they played Dick, Kerr at Windsor Park. Dick, Kerr won by two goals to zero, but both teams were not at their best that year. Fémina, for instance, had left the French Federation and played their own championship that season.²⁸ The two teams also wanted to play in Dublin, but this match was cancelled as the Free State Purity League has strong objections against women athletes, who they believed did not behave like a woman should.²⁹ Dublin may have had a women's football match in 1924, as a

²⁰ 'Ladies' Match at the Oval', *Belfast Newsletter*, 21 May 1921, 8. 'Ladies' Football Match', *Belfast Newsletter*, 23 May 1921, 2. 'Ladies' Match at the Oval', *Northern Whig*, 21 May 1921, 3. 'Ladies' Match at the Oval', *Northern Whig*, 23 May 1921, 3. 'Feted in Belfast', *Fleetwood Chronicle*, 27 May 1921, 6.

²¹ 'Ladies' International Match', *Ireland's Saturday Night*, 4 June 1921, 6. Advertisement, *Northern Whig*, 14 May 1921, 8. 'Ladies' Football', *Northern Whig*, 6 June 1921, 9. 'Warriors' Day in Belfast', *Belfast Newsletter*, 16 May 1921, 7. 'Lord Mayor's Tribute to Warriors', *Belfast Newsletter*, 28 May 1921, 7. 'Items', *Belfast Newsletter*, 30 May 1921, 2. Advertisement, *Belfast Newsletter*, 2 June 1921, 4. 'The Ladies' Football 'National', *Belfast Telegraph*, 6 June 1921, 5. 'Ladies' Football', *Sport (Dublin)*, 11 June 1921, 14. 'Ladies' Football', *Fleetwood Chronicle* 10 June 1921, 7.

²² 'Items' *Belfast Newsletter*, 26 September 1921, 2. Advertisement, *Belfast Newsletter*, 17 October 1921, 2. 'To-Day's Ladies' Match', *Belfast Newsletter*, 26 October 1921, 2. 'Visit of Dick, Kerr's Ladies Team', *Belfast Newsletter*, 27 October 1921, 2. 'Items', *Belfast Newsletter*, 31 October 1921, 2. Advertisement, *Belfast Telegraph*, 18 October 1921, 7. 'Hats Off to the Ladies', *Belfast Telegraph*, 24 October 1921, 2. 'Dick, Kerr's Ladies' Visit', *Northern Whig*, 25 October 1921, 3. 'To-Day's Ladies' Match', *Northern Whig*, 26 October 1921, 3. 'Visit of Dick, Kerr's Ladies' Team', *Northern Whig*, 27 October 1921, 3. 'Football', *Freeman's Journal*, 27 October 1921, 7. 'Sporting Jottings', *Kildare Observer*, 29 October 1921, 6.

²³ 'Magheramore Holds Carnival', *Larne Times*, 13 August 1921, 2.

²⁴ 'Hospitals Sports Gala', *Northern Whig*, 11 March 1922, 6. 'Items', *Belfast Newsletter*, 13 March 1922, 9.

²⁵ 'Galashiels', *Dumfries Standard*, 24 April 1924, 4. 'Galashiels', *Southern Reporter*, 24 April 1924, 4.

²⁶ Fémina Sports, 'Réunion du Conseil', 5 April 1924.

²⁷ 'Fact, Anecdote & History', *Lancashire Evening Post*, 6 December 1924, 7.

²⁸ 'Advertisement', *Belfast Telegraph*, 4 May 1925, 8. 'Kisses Before Football', *Belfast Telegraph*, 12 May 1925, 7. 'French Football Ladies vs. Dick, Kerr's XI', *Belfast Telegraph*, 18 May 1925, 8. 'Homely Talents', *Belfast Telegraph*, 21 May 1925, 5. Advertisement, *Belfast Telegraph*, 22 May 1925, 5. Photo, *Belfast Telegraph*, 23 May 1925, 3. Photos, *Belfast Telegraph*, 25 May 1925, 3. Photo, *Irish Independent*, 12 May 1925, 3. 'Women's Football at Belfast', *Irish Independent*, 25 May 1925, 9. 'Ladies' Football Match in Belfast', *Belfast Newsletter*, 18 May 1925, 2. Advertisement, *Belfast Newsletter*, 23 May 1925, 2. 'Ladies at Football', *Belfast Newsletter*, 25 May 1925, 3. 'Attractive Football Novelty', *Northern Whig*, 18 May 1925. 'French Lady Footballers' Visit', *Northern Whig*, 22 May 1925, 5. 'To-Day's Sports Programme', *Northern Whig*, 23 May 1925, 4. 'The Ladies' International in Belfast', *Northern Whig*, 25 May 1925, 4; 12. 'Ladies' Football in Belfast', *Northern Whig*, 1 September 1925, 3. 'Excursions', *Weekly Telegraph*, 23 May 1925, 1.

²⁹ 'Ban on Lady Footballers', *Northern Whig*, 1 June 1925, 3.

‘Ladies Football Match’ was advertised as part of a sports carnival at St. James’s Park in Dolphin Barn on 14 September. It is unclear whether was played under association rules or Gaelic football rules.³⁰

The Rutherglen Show

Two years later, Ireland was visited once again by two foreign teams, Rutherglen and Edinburgh. These two teams toured Ireland and the Edinburgh side soon was joined by a young Irish woman who became, for a while, one of the best players worldwide: Molly Seaton.³¹ The original tour plans saw the teams playing in Belfast, Londonderry, Dundalk, Dublin, Cork and again Belfast and Dublin. Judging from the currently known matches, the plans must have altered. After playing a few matches in Northern Ireland (in Belfast/Cregagh, Carrick, Larne, Ballymena and Milltown [county Armagh]), Rutherglen travelled south and played some Dublin ladies in Milltown, winning easily with nine goals to one before a crowd of twelve thousand.³² When Rutherglen returned to Belfast, the Edinburgh team had transformed to the Irish Ladies, which was in fact a mix of Scottish and Irish players, including Molly Seaton and Winnie McKenna. Though advertised as ‘Ireland vs. Scotland’, these matches were also not full internationals.³³ When Rutherglen went back to Scotland, at least one Irish woman was on the boat, as Molly Seaton toured Scotland with the ‘Scotland vs. Ireland’ show of Rutherglen.³⁴ In the following year another tour was played in Northern Ireland (with confirmed matches in Larne, Ballymena and Londonderry in early September 1928).³⁵ Seaton was a very popular figure by then. Just after the 1928 tour, she played for the men’s River Forth Rovers team and assisted them in their two to one victory over the Linfield Football Club Reserves.³⁶

The Second Wave

After two more years of very sparse women’s football activity there came, out of the blue, the second boom of women’s football in Ireland. This time mainly the female mill workers and the managers of the mills were responsible for it. Twelve thousand people watched a match

³⁰ Advertisement, *Evening Standard*, 1, 13 September 1924, 1.

³¹ ‘Scots Girls at Football’, *Belfast Telegraph*, 10 May 1927, 8. ‘Ladies’ Football’, *Northern Whig*, 10 May 1927, 5.

³² ‘Scots Girls at Football’, *Belfast Telegraph*, 10 May 1927, 8. Advertisement, *Weekly Telegraph*, 7 May 1927, 4. ‘Carrick Football Notes’, *Weekly Telegraph*, 14 May 1927, 4. ‘Football Notes’, *Ballymena Observer*, 20 May 1927, 10. ‘Athletics’, *Irish Independent*, 16 May 1927, 10. Photo, *Evening Herald*, 21 May 1927, 8. Photo, *Evening Herald*, 24 May 1927, 1. ‘Football’, *Daily Record*, 5 May 1927, 12. Helena Byrne, ‘Where Are We Now?’ also mentions the tour (8–9). Reports can’t confirm that the proposed matches in Dundalk and Cork were played. Regarding the schedule, it seems highly unlikely that matches other than the Rutherglen vs. Dublin match in Milltown were played in the Free State.

³³ Photo, *Belfast Telegraph*, 24 May 1927, 12.

³⁴ Apart from Molly Seaton, Lizzy Wilson is the only Irish woman known to have played in one of the matches in Scotland. M. Ward could be a third, but her origin is highly questionable. ‘Kelly’s “Koleens”’, *Daily Record*, 1 June 1927, 12. ‘Football’, *Cambuslang Advertiser*, 18 June 1927, 4. ‘Flotsam and Jetsam’, *Bellshill Speaker*, 9 September 1927, 1. ‘Ladies’ Football’, *Bellshill Speaker*, 9 September 1927, 4. ‘Lady Footballers at Bellshill’, *Motherwell Times*, 9 September 1927, 6. ‘Women’s National at Scone’, *Dundee Courier*, 20 March 1928, 8. ‘Ladies’ Match at Scone’, *Dundee Courier*, 10 April 1928, 8. ‘One More Month of Senior Football’, *Perthshire Advertiser*, 24 March 1928, 18. ‘Football’, *Perthshire Advertiser*, 11 April 1928, 18. ‘Scone’, *Perthshire Advertiser*, 14 April 1928, 14.

³⁵ *Daily Record* 1927-6-1, *Cambuslang Advertiser* 1927-6-18, *Bellshill Speaker* 1927-9-2, 1927-9-9, *Motherwell Times* 1927-9-9, *Dundee Courier* 1928-3-20, 1928-4-10, *Perthshire Advertiser* 1928-3-24, 1928-4-11, 1928-4-14 – Apart from Molly Seaton Lizzy Wilson is the only Irish women of which we know for sure to have played in one of these matches in Scotland. M. Ward could be a third player, but her origin is highly questionable.

³⁶ ‘Ladies’ Match’, *Ballymena Observer*, 14 September 1928, 9. ‘Football Notices’, *Belfast Telegraph*, 8 September 1928, 1.

between Belfast Ropeworks and Owen O’Cork in May 1931, which ended in a 2–0 victory for the Ropeworks team.³⁷ This event started a series of matches and more teams in Belfast, Bangor and Newtownards were founded. Before long, Molly Seaton became part of the movement. After something like a cameo appearance for Owen O’Cork in the return match, she soon joined the Jennymount team, which together with Milewater was part of the almost invincible York Road team—but only when Molly Seaton played.³⁸ York Street and Ropeworks were also responsible for the first known appearance of an Irish women’s football team on foreign soil for ten years, when the two teams played an exhibition match on the Isle of Man in July 1931, drawing 3–3. The trip was organised by the Glentoran Football Club.³⁹ The highlight of the season was the match at Windsor Park between the Preston Ladies’ team—formerly Dick, Kerr—and a selection of Belfast women playing under the name of Ulster. As the reports said, it was more or less a match between Molly Seaton and Dick, Kerr. Miss Seaton, who was at her best form during the years of 1931 and 1932, can only be described as a force of nature. Preston needed three players to shadow Ulster’s captain, who seemed to be everywhere in the field. Notwithstanding this intense marking, she managed to score two goals and even had the chance to level the score. Preston was lucky to win by the odd goal in five.⁴⁰ It may have been this match that caused some rumours a few years later in a *Daily Mail* article where it was claimed that the Irish goalkeeper was man disguised as a woman, wearing complete female attire with a wig and false breasts.⁴¹

The following year, 1932, saw a slight reduction in the number of Irish teams and started with a sad report of the suicide of a member of the Newtownards women’s team in April.⁴² On the other hand, this year made history in Irish women’s football. First, the only multiteam competition played before World War II took place that year. Initiated by the secretary of Dundela Football Club, Mr. G. Semple, the playing of the Irish Ladies Challenge Cup made Northern Ireland only the fourth nation—after France, England and Belgium—to hold a national Cup competition for women’s teams.⁴³ In 1918 there had been plans for a summer league for the women’s teams, but it never happened.⁴⁴ So, with at least six teams in the competition, the first round finally started in June 1932, with all first-round matches played at Wilgar Park, Sandtown. As there were no rules regarding transfers, after adding some players of the eliminated teams to their squad Molly Seaton’s XI won the cup convincingly against Ropeworks, with a score of five goals to zero.⁴⁵

³⁷ ‘Women’s Match for Hospital’, *Northern Whig*, 16 May 1931, 5. ‘Templemore Avenue Hospital’, *Northern Whig*, 30 May 1931, 8. Photo, *Northern Whig*, 28 May 1931, 5. ‘Ladies’ Football Match’, *Belfast Telegraph*, 26 May 1931, 8. ‘Spectators Rush the Field’, *Belfast Telegraph*, 28 May 1931, 8. Photo, *Belfast Newsletter*, 28 May 1931, 8. ‘Templemore Hospital Week’, *Belfast Newsletter*, 30 May 1931, 5.

³⁸ ‘Women’s Match at the Oval Tonight’, *Northern Whig*, 17 June 1931, 3. ‘Women’s Match in Aid of Glentoran Pavillion Fund’, *Northern Whig*, 18 June 1931, 5. ‘Belfast Ladies’ Football Match’, *Belfast Newsletter*, 18 June 1931, 3. ‘Mystery Inside-Right’, *Belfast Telegraph*, 18 June 1931, 8.

³⁹ The matches by the team called ‘Ireland’ in Scotland, 1927–28, were not played by an Irish team. It was in fact a mix of Scottish and Irish women. The report refers to an international match between Northern Ireland (with Molly Seaton) and the Free State, regarding which no sources have surfaced, and which highly probably was a mistake by the reporter. ‘Ladies’ Football Match’, *Isle of Man Examiner*, 10 July 1931, 6. ‘Novel Entertainment at Tromode’, *Isle of Man Examiner*, 17 July 1931, 6.

⁴⁰ Advertisement, *Belfast Telegraph*, 16 July 1931, 11. ‘Girls Football Match’, *Belfast Telegraph*, 28 July 1931, 8. Advertisement, *Belfast Newsletter*, 24 July 1931, 15. ‘Women’s Charity Match’, *Belfast Newsletter*, 28 July 1931, 2. ‘Ladies’ International Match To-Night at Windsor Park’, *Northern Whig*, 27 July 1931, 5., ‘Football for Charity’, *Northern Whig*, 28 July 1931, 5.

⁴¹ ‘Deceivers Ever’, *Daily Mirror*, 12 October 1938, 30.

⁴² ‘Ads Girl Mystery’, *Herald and County Down Independent*, 14 May 1932, 2.

⁴³ Advertisement, *Belfast Telegraph*, 21 April 1932, 6.

⁴⁴ ‘Northern Notes’, *Sport*, 8 June 1918, 3.

⁴⁵ Nelson and Mawhinney of the Linfield team were two of the fresh recruits. Advertisement, *Northern Whig*, 29 June 1932, 3. Advertisement, *Northern Whig*, 18 August 1932, 8. ‘Molly Seaton’s XI Win Cup’, *Northern Whig*,

The second historic event was the two international matches against French champion Fémina Sport de Paris in August 1932. Fifteen thousand spectators came to see Molly Seaton running circles around her opponents and it was a spectacular, tough match. After Kearney and Seaton gave their colours the 3–2 lead at halftime, Fémina decided to shadow Seaton with two players. This proved to be the right tactical decision, as the French champion finally ran out as winners with a 4–3 final score. During the first half, Carmen Pomiès, the Captain of Fémina, was injured and had to be replaced. Furthermore, Seaton got injured during the second half and had to be rushed to the hospital after the match.

With both captains out due to injury, the two teams met again the following day at Bangor's Ballyholme Showgrounds. Surprisingly, the Irish managed to compensate for the loss of Seaton and got a lead during the first half, during which a fistfight broke out between an Irish and a Paris player. Mick Hamill separated the two and ordered a handshake between them in the second half, to which the French player responded with a kiss on both cheeks for 'the amazed Irish girl'. With all their fighting spirit, the Irish managed to hold their narrow lead until the end and caused quite a sensation.⁴⁶

Table 2: Women's football teams active in Ireland, 1931–1932

• Belfast Ropeworks
• Owen O'Cork
• York Street / Road
• Jennymount (Crusaders)
• Milewater
• Bangor Ladies
• Newtownards Ladies
• Linfield Ladies
• Loopbridge Girls
• Bloomfield Ladies (1932)
• Shelbourne Ladies (1932)
• Molly Seaton's Team (1932)

For the next three years, the only activity in Irish women's football were some exhibition matches. Molly Seaton's team played a team called Glenvale, but the two teams were obviously from the same stable, as they interchanged players quite frequently.⁴⁷ As such, when the last big event of Irish women's football came in 1936, the standard of play had dropped significantly due to a lack of competitive matches in Ireland. Organised by Alf Frankland and with the help

19 August 1932, 3. 'Girls on Football Field', *Belfast Telegraph*, 30 June 1932, 8. 'Girls' Football Match', *Belfast Telegraph*, 18 August 1932, 8., 'Belfast Girls at Football', *Belfast Telegraph*, 20 August 1932, 8.

⁴⁶ 'To Aid Hospital', *Northern Whig*, 1 August 1932, 11, 'French Lady Footballers', *Northern Whig*, 4 August 1932, 8, 'Frenchwomen Beat Irish', *Northern Whig*, 5 August 1932, 8, 'Frenchwomen Beaten', *Northern Whig*, 6 August 1932, 2, (Advertisement), *Belfast Newsletter*, 3 August 1932, 1, 'Ladies' Internationals', *Belfast Newsletter*, 5 August 1932, 12, 'French Ladies at Bangor', *Belfast Newsletter*, 6 August 1932, 10, 'French Girl Footballers', *Belfast Telegraph*, 3 August 1932, 9, (Advertisement), *Belfast Telegraph*, 4 August 1932, 2, 'Lady Footballers in Charity Game', *Belfast Telegraph*, 5 August 1932, 9, 'Women Footballers', *Belfast Telegraph*, 6 August 1932, 9, 'Ireland v. France', *Down Herald and County Down Independent*, 6 August 1932, 2, 'French Ladies Visit Bangor', *Down Herald and County Down Independent*, 13 August 1932, 6, 'Ladies' Football', *Ballymena Observer*, 12 August 1932, 9.

⁴⁷ 'Mid-Summer Football', *Belfast Telegraph*, 21 June 1933, 8, (Advertisement), *Belfast Telegraph*, 8 July 1933, 12, 'Mrs. McCollough Kicks Off', *Belfast Telegraph*, 25 October 1935, 4, 'Ladies' Football in Carrick', *Larne Times*, 26 October 1935, 4. Though on a low level at first, women still played football, even on international scale after 1932. Recent researched by the author has shown, that the gap of more than 30 years without women's football, which Helena Byrne, 'Where are we now?', 9 assumed based on the sources can now be reduced to only three years between 1939 and 1942.

of Winnie McKenna, a French team came to Ireland. This time, it was finally a French selection that resembled the true French national team. Only two thousand people came to see the match between the Irish and French teams this time and it was clear that the Irish ‘national team’, consisting of players from Whitehouse and Carrickfergus, was no match for the strong French team. At one point, France almost walked off the field after Seaton made a brutal foul. Ireland lost the match by one goal to four, but the match was close to a full international. After a few more reported matches, Irish women’s football vanished almost completely after 1937. The *Belfast Telegraph* noted in December 1938 that ‘there are no ladies’ teams in Belfast’.⁴⁸

And the Free State?

No reports have been found on women’s football after the match played by Rutherglen in Milltown in 1927. Only in December 1937 did plans for a team in Dublin create some interest, and discussion about it surfaced all kinds of opinions concerning women’s football, ranging from sympathy to rejection, in letters to the *Evening Standard*. The first letter by a certain ‘Bobs XI’ refers to a women’s football match in England of which he or she had read. Why, the writer asked, was there no women’s football in the Free State? The last match he or she remembered was the match in Milltown. The writer also suggests that a women’s match between the Free State and England would be a great attraction.

The first reply by ‘Thomas Noctor’ was strongly favoured this idea, and offered additional suggestions including a Dundalk vs Dublin match. This writer also remarked that the subject should be treated seriously, with good coaching for the players.

Less serious were later letters by S. Smith from the Gaiety Theatre who offered his ‘Lady Footballers’ (obviously part of the theatre program) for a challenge against any other women’s team in Dublin, or a letter from ‘Father’ who offered his six-month-old daughter as a forward, stating that she ‘is a great dribbler’.

There were, of course, letters that showed disapproval for the idea of women playing football, either because they were not felt to be good enough or because it was felt they should rather play basketball instead. ‘[T]he modern girl’s feet,’ one argued, ‘are far too awkward to be adapted to soccer and also those girls are too featherheaded to make quick, unerring decisions’.

Overall, however, the tone of most letters was in favour of the idea of a Dublin ladies’ football team, with some correspondents even proposing a Counties League and a Counties Cup for women. Even letters by women were published, including the one from ‘Girls’, stating that she had some friends that really loved to play football, had seen English female footballers on screen, and ‘envied them’.

The last letter on that subject found so far was by ‘Upright’ who had independently considered a female team for quite a while and intended to form a Works League with female referees. We currently do not know if his idea resulted in the formation of a female football team, but it is remarkable to note the strong desire of women and men to start such teams and organise competitions.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ ‘Girls at Football’, *Belfast Telegraph*, 24 December 1936, 8. ‘Football’, *Belfast Telegraph*, 31 December 1936, 8. Advertisement, *Larne Times*, 26 December 1936, 1. ‘Ballyclare News’, *Larne Times*, 2 January 1937, 2. ‘Welsh and Girls’ Football’, *Belfast Telegraph*, 5 December 1938, 6.

⁴⁹ ‘Ladies’ “Soccer” Team’, *Evening Herald*, 3 December 1937, 3. ‘Letters to the Editor’, *Evening Herald*, 10 December 1937, 4. ‘Not Good Enough’, *Evening Herald*, 11 December 1937, 9. ‘Letters to the Editor’, *Evening Herald*, 14 December 1937, 5. ‘Ladies’ Soccer’, *Evening Herald*, 16 December 1937, 5. ‘One From Carlow’, *Evening Herald*, 17 December 1937, 4. ‘Ladies’ Football’, *Evening Herald*, 18 December 1937, 4. ‘Lady Footballers’, *Evening Herald*, 20 December 1937, 9.

Fourteen years later, a young woman was the driving force behind the next known attempt to form a female football team in the Free State. Nineteen-year-old Peggy Robinson, who worked as a stenographer, organised a women's soccer match which proved to be a success. Her next step was to advertise the idea of forming a women's team, a call which received hundreds of letters of support. Whether or not the proposed Dublin club finally materialised, it is quite clear that women of the Free State wished to play football.⁵⁰

The Portadown Years

After some charity matches during World War II, the last restart of the old period came in 1945. Portadown became the centre of the movement, and there was talk about forming a league there in 1948. There were also active teams in the Lisburn area. Once again, teams came from the factories of the town, which, like Clonavon, had been active during the First World War. Even Belfast joined in with the Ropeworks and Ewart's fielding yet another eleven. Finally, the cigarette company Gallaher's and the Glentoran female team joined as newcomers. Thousands of people came to see the women play, and again criticism—or even talk about banning women's football—was completely absent. During the entire period covered in this research, female footballers were always able to play at the regular venues of the top teams, including Windsor Park. Reports from other parts of Northern Ireland and the Free State indicate that teams were formed.⁵¹ In 1950, women's football in Ireland became international again when Portadown played two matches as the earliest-known Irish female football team in Scotland (Portadown lost both matches).⁵² Soon afterwards, immediately after a seventy-minute match between Preston and a French section, a combined Portadown/Dungannon team scored ten goals without reply against Preston in just 30 minutes. This indicates quite clearly how low the standard was, compared to the golden era in the 1930s.⁵³ The matches between Preston and France had nothing approaching the class they had had 1935-36. The French 'national' team was a selection of sportswomen who may have played football in their spare time, but there had not been any kind of organised football in France since 1938. The following year, Preston had another challenge match after their win against the French, and this time they beat a team called Ulster ladies by two goals to zero.⁵⁴ Glentoran, Portadown and Ropeworks kept on playing for a while, but after the matches for Coronation Day in 1953, it was all over again.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ 'Is Nothing Sacred', *Waterford Standard*, 29 September 1951, 5.

⁵¹ 'Birches Ladies' Football', *Portadown News*, 22 June 1946, 5. 'Derryane Ladies' Football Team', *Portadown News*, 28 September 1946, 3. 'Ladies' Football League', *Portadown News*, 10 April 1948, 6. 'Ladies' Football', *Belfast Telegraph*, 9 June 1947, 3. 'Girls' Football Match in Belfast', *Belfast Telegraph*, 11 August 1949, 3. Advertisement, *Belfast Newsletter*, 15 August 1949, 1. '12,000 See Women at Soccer', *Northern Whig*, 23 August 1949, 5. Advertisement, *Lisburn Standard*, 22 June 1945, 6. 'Ladies' Football Match', *Lisburn Standard*, 29 June 1945, 2.

⁵² 'Ladies' Team to the Fore', *Portadown News*, 1 April 1950, 2. 'Portadown Girls Lose Twice in Scotland', *Portadown News*, 15 July 1950, 5. 'Women's Football', *Belfast Newsletter*, 7 July 1950, 7. Photo, *Northern Whig*, 8 July 1950, 5.

⁵³ 'Ladies Team to the Fore', *Portadown News*, 1 April 1950, 2. 'International Ladies' Match for Portadown', *Portadown News*, 24 June 1950, 2. 'Clear-Cut Win for Portadown Ladies', *Portadown News*, 8 July 1950, 2. 'Civic Welcome for English, French Ladies Teams', *Portadown News*, 22 July 1950, 3. 'Girls' National Football Teams and the Royal Visit', *Belfast Telegraph*, 17 July 1950, 7. 'Girls' Football at Portadown', *Belfast Telegraph*, 18 July 1950, 6. 'Women Football Player', *Belfast Newsletter*, 18 July 1950, 6.

⁵⁴ 'French Ladies' Soccer Side to Visit Belfast', *Belfast Telegraph*, 28 June 1951, 8. 'Something Different for Windsor Park', *Northern Whig*, 21 July 1951, 2. 'Events of the Week', *Northern Whig*, 23 July 1951, 3. 'Englishwomen Beat France', *Northern Whig*, 25 July 1951, 2. 'Women's Matches in Ulster', *Belfast Newsletter*, 23 July 1951, 7. 'Women's Teams for Windsor Park', *Belfast Newsletter*, 25 July 1951, 6.

⁵⁵ Advertisement, *Northern Whig*, 26 July 1952, 6. Advertisement, *Northern Whig*, 2 August 1952, 6. 'Lady Soccer Stars Start the Season', *Belfast Telegraph*, 1 August 1952, 8. 'Portadown Ladies XI Lose 3-1', *Portadown News*, 9 August 1952, 2. 'The Town's Coronation Celebration', *Portadown Times*, 24 April 1953, 1.

Table 3: Women's football teams active in Ireland, 1945–1952

• Lisnagarvey (45)	Ravarnettes (43-45)
• Moneymore Mermaids (45-46)	Coagh Amazons (45-50)
• Edenderry / Hamilton Robb's (46-47)	The Birches (46-48)
• Clonavon Blues (46)	Derryane (46-48)
• Spence, Brysen & Co. (46)	Canary (46)
• Moy Ladies (46)	Wades Portadown (47-48)
• Lurgan Ladies (47-49)	Portadown Ladies (47-52)
• Barrhead Ladies (45-49)	Acheson's Ladies Team (47)
• Milltown Ladies (47-48)	Ewart's United (48)
• Gallarher's (48-50)	Dungannon Ladies (49-51)
• Belfast Ropeworks (49-52)	Glentoran Ladies (51-52)
• Ballywater Ladies (50-51)	Ballyclare Ladies (51)

Conclusion

Compared to women's football in other countries, the Irish community was active. One thing these early players had in common with other national contexts like England,⁵⁶ Australia or Austria was that Irish women's football flourished in waves, not in a steady development. Internationally, the first wave was usually World War I, followed by a strong second wave between 1920 and 1924 when women started to expand their newly-won political importance into sport.⁵⁷ The second wave came at the beginning of the 1930s, at the height of the Great Depression, when the charity aspect gave a boost to women's football. After World War II, countries on the British Isles restarted women's football, much in the vein of the interwar period. A massive boom in almost every country in Europe was brought about by the 1954 World Cup: the crucial step towards modern women's football.

The Irish teams were mainly organised by factories for their female employees. They were not clubs in the modern sense, as in France, Belgium, the Netherlands or Austria, and so players often played for several teams in one season. There was also no federation, and as far as we know, this matter was never discussed in Ireland these years. That is one reason why the 1936 match against France could not be counted as a full-international by modern standards. The organisation was in the first years up to 1925 in the hands of Mrs Walter Scott, afterwards in the 1930s, Molly Seaton and Winnie McKenna played a major role in organising the game. In the 1930s Seaton became, as far as we know, the first female referee in a women's football match in Ireland.⁵⁸

The discussion of whether women should play football is almost completely absent in newspapers of the time. Reading the reports, one can see quite a lot of sympathy and encouragement for the 'lady footballers', as they were called in the first half of the twentieth

⁵⁶ Jean Williams and Rob Hess, 'Women, Football and History: International Perspectives', *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 32, no. 18 (2015): 2115-2122. Jean Williams also discusses the 1921 FA Ban on women's football ('A Beautiful Game', 123-137). For more on years after the ban see Brennan, 'English Ladies Football League' (esp. the sections 'English Ladies football Association 1921-22' and 'Darlington Quaker Ladies').

⁵⁷ Jean Williams, *Contemporary History of Women's Sport, Part One: Sporting Women 1850-1960* (Routledge: 2014) 120-122; Fiona Skillen, *Women, Sport and Modernity in Interwar Britain* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2013), 5-6; Xavier Breuil, *Histoire du football féminin en Europe* (Paris: Nouveau Monde Editions, 2011), 43-51.

⁵⁸ The first known match with Molly Seaton as referee was on 24 July 1931, with Jennymount Mill vs. Milewater Mill ('Football', *Belfast Telegraph*, 25 July 1931, 4). At least two others followed. In all the other 200 matches researched by the author for the period 1881-1953 in Ireland (Northern Ireland and the Free State) there were only male referees in women's football matches.

century, who were mostly treated fairly by reporters, spectators and footballers. As matches were mainly played for charity, much assistance was provided by male clubs, who generously let the ladies use their facilities and stadiums. The IFA wasn't much in favour of women's football, and even refused to meet a deputation about cooperation for benefit games of women's teams in 1920. Nevertheless, male Irish players never condemned women's football officially, as was done in England, Belgium, Austria and elsewhere, and as a result some very prominent figures of Irish football became involved in the development of the women's game. Famous players like Hamill, McCracken or Bambrick acted as referees or linesmen, and helped in training the women. The league committees even postponed league-matches when the ladies asked to use their ground. As was almost unthinkable in most parts of Europe, an Irish female player was sometimes involved in a regular test match by two male teams, as Molly Seaton was in 1928. Judging by the constant high numbers of spectators attending women's football during the period, as well as published reports on international matches, it is clear that the public supported women's football—or at least the good cause for which the women played.

Of course, there were also the usual critical voices which we find all around Europe whenever women played football. Though the role of the women in society had changed, it was not a given that women would play football. Their physical ability was often questioned, and even women themselves criticised the lack of grace of women footballers. It was even harder for married women, as husbands often forbade their wives from playing football, which made it a sport mainly for unmarried women.⁵⁹

It is a bit frustrating for a researcher to observe that despite the opportunity to practice football, Irish women continued for barely more than two years, and then stopped playing. This is a phenomenon found in most countries where women played football in this period. Women's football, as mentioned before, was developing in waves, and multiple reasons contributed to the flourishing of women's football one year, and its coming to an almost complete standstill the next. Though explanations have yet to be specified, the material we have we suggests that reasons were sometimes political, sometimes connected with the social role of women, sometimes economical and sometimes a product of obstruction by national football federations.

Ireland was one of the most active countries in women's football during the interwar period. Research shows that that Northern Ireland was one of the leading countries in women's football in the 1930s.⁶⁰ As can be seen in statistics of the international matches played by the Northern Irish section, they were in the early 1930s almost on equal terms with Dick, Kerr's and Fémina. Some of the best players of these years were Irish—like Ruby Hall, Winnie McKenna and, of course, Molly Seaton. This latter player might have been one of the best players in the world during the early 1930s. Irish female footballers today have every right to be proud of their early history.

⁵⁹ Mark Patrick Tynan, *Association football and Irish Society During the Inter-War Period 1918-1939* (PhD diss, Department of History, National University of Ireland, Maynooth 2013), 27-29, n62; the IFA refused to meet a women's football deputation. On the 1921 ban of women's football in England by the FA see Sue Lopez, *Women on the Ball. A Guide to Women's Football* (London: Scarlet Press, 1997), 6-9, Lisa Jenkel, 'The FA ban of women's football in the contemporary press – a historical discourse analysis', *Sport in History* (2020), DOI: 10.1080/17460263.2020.1726441, 8–14.

⁶⁰ During the period 1931 and 1932 Northern Ireland played Preston Ladies (later Dick, Kerr's) in 1931, losing only 2–3, and a strengthened Fémina Sport de Paris, then the ten-time French champion, losing 3–4 and winning 1–0 in 1932 (see Statistics). These results show that the female footballers of Northern Ireland were on equal terms with two of the best teams in the world at that time. See also the works by Jean Williams, *A Beautiful Game & A Game for Rough Girls* (on British Football), Xavier Breuil, *Histoire du Football Féminin* (on France and Belgium), Laurence Preudhomme-Poncet, *Histoire du football féminin au XX^e siècle* (Paris, Budapest, Torino, L'Harmattan, 2003) (on France), Helge Faller and Matthias Marschik, *Eine Klasse für sich – Als Wiener Fußballerinnen einzig in der Welt waren*, (Wien, Verlagshaus Hernals, 2020) (on Austria), Helge Faller, *Hun Tid Vooruit & Les Footballleuses, De eerste Voetballeerinas* (on France, Belgium, and the Netherlands).

Statistics⁶¹

International Matches by Ireland (1917-1936)⁶²

I. Belfast, 26 December 1917 (kick-off at 11 a.m.)

Ireland vs. England (North of England Munition Workers) 1-4

Referee: William “Willy” McCracken (Newcastle United)

Linesmen: William “Billy” Lacy (Linfield Belfast), Michael “Mick” Hamill (Manchester United)

Attendance: 12,000, Grosvenor Park

Goals: Hall / Dorrian, Jackson, Cornforth (pen.), Kirk

Ireland:

C. Lennon (Belfast Whites) – Oberon (Lurgan Blues), E. Walker (Belfast Whites) – E. Riddell (Belfast Whites), G. Morrow (Belfast Whites / Captain), E. McCune (Belfast Whites) – N. Cox (Belfast Whites), Isobel Montgomery (Belfast Whites), Ruby Hall (Lurgan Blues), A. Burrowes (Belfast Whites), Murphy (Lurgan Blues)

England:

Mary Scott (Palmer’s Jarrow) – Hilda Weygood (North Eastern Marine), Maggie Shortt (Wallsend Slipway) – Bella Willis (Elswick Works), Bella Carrott (North East Marine / Captain), Bella Turnbull (Wallsend Slipway) – Mary Dorrian (Brown’s West Hartlepool), Nellie Kirk (Brown’s West Hartlepool), Sarah Cornforth (Birtley), Ethel Jackson (North Eastern Marine), Elizabeth “Lizzie” McConnell (Wallsend Slipway)

II.

Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 21 September 1918 (kick-off at 3:30 p.m.)

North of England vs. Ireland 5-2

Referee: James Lawrence (Newcastle United)

Linesmen: Walter Scott (Ireland), Pearce (England)

Attendance: 2,000, St. James’s Park

Goals: 1-0 Mary Lyons, 2-0 Winnie McKenna, 2-1 Ruby Hall, 3-1 Nellie Kirk, 4-1 Mary Lyons, 5-1 Winnie McKenna, 5-2 Ruby Hall

England:

Mary Scott (Palmer’s) – Hilda Weygood (Wallsend), Ethel Jackson (West Wallsend) – Willis (Prudhoe / Captain), Sarah Cornforth (West Pelton), Bella Carrott (Gateshead) – Mary Dorrian (Hartlepool), Nellie Kirk (Hartlepool), Winnie McKenna (South Bank), Minnie Seed (Sunderland), Elizabeth McConnell (Rose Hill) / Mary Lyons (Palmer’s)

⁶¹ A statistical record of about two hundred matches played in Northern Ireland and the Free State, researched by the author, is in preparation. Similar records will be prepared for England, Scotland and Wales. Helge Faller, *The Female Pioneers: A Statistical Record of Women’s Football in Great Britain and Ireland from 1881 to 1953* [2 vols] (Nussdorf: Les Sports et la Femme, [2021]).

⁶² In match reports of the time, the team was always stated as Ireland though with players predominately from Northern Ireland.

Ireland:

J. Fisher (Belfast Whites) – E. Walker (Belfast Whites), E. Moffett (Belfast Whites) – L. Riddell (Belfast Whites / Captain), Forsyth (Ewart's), E. McCune (Belfast Whites) – Martin (Ewart's), L. McClatchey (Portadown), Ruby Hall (Lurgan Blues), L. Knox (Ewart's), D. Dornan (Belfast Whites) / Reserve: Elsie Hall (Lurgan Blues), Isobel Montgomery (Belfast Whites)

III. Blackpool, 29 September 1920

Dick, Kerr's Ladies vs. Ireland

7-0(4-0)

Attendance: 6,000-15,000

Goals: Harris (2), Redford (3), Mills (2)

Dick, Kerr's:

Annie Hastie – Alice Kell, Lily Parr – Alice Walmsley, Lily Lee, Florrie Haslam – Alice Mills, Florrie Redford, Jennie Harris, Clayton, Willis

Ireland:

Thorington – J. Fisher (Belfast Whites), Kane – A. Burrows (Belfast Whites), Edith Montgomery (Belfast Whites), F. Allen (Belfast Whites) – L. McClatchey (Portadown), Ruby Hall (Lurgan), Winnie McKenna (Lurgan), L. Knox (Belfast Whites), Isobel Montgomey (Belfast Whites)

IV. Belfast, 29 March 1921 (kick-off at 3 p.m.)

Ireland vs. North of England

2-3(2-1)

Referee: Hugh Prentice

Attendance: 10,000, Windsor Park

Goals: 1-0(15.) Ruby Hall, 1-1 Mary Lyons, 2-1(ca. 30.) Ruby Hall, 2-2 Plummer, 2-3 (ca. 65.) Mary Lyons

Ireland:

L. Knox (Belfast Whites) – Winnie McKenna (Lurgan), J. Heyden (Banbridge) – H. Killiner (Knock), J. Merritt (Belfast Whites), F. Allen (Belfast Whites) – L. McClatchey (Portadown), K. Killiner (Knock), Ruby Hall (Lurgan), B. Toman (Belfast Whites), E. Riddell (Bangor)

North of England:

Mary Scott (Palmer's Jarrow) – Hilda Weygood (West Wallsend), Isabella Willis (Prudhoe) – Elisabeth Form (Haverton Hill), Sarah Cornforth (West Pelton), M. Hodgson (West Hartlepool) – L. Seeds (Middlesbrough), Mary Dorrian (West Hartlepool), Beatrice Taylor (Palmer's Jarrow), Mary Lyons (Palmer's Jarrow), Isabella Plummer (West Hartlepool)

V. Belfast, 4 June 1921

Ireland vs. Fleetwood Ladies F.C.3-1(1-1)

Attendance: 4,000, Solitude

Goals: 0-1 Scott, 1-1 Winnie McKenna, 2-1 Winnie McKenna, 3-1 Ruby Hall

Ireland:

Brown – J. Hayden (Banbridge), H. Kilner (Knock) – F. Allen (Belfast Whites), Winnie McKenna (Lurgan / Captain), J. Merritt (Belfast Whites) – Murdough, Isobel Montgomery (Belfast Whites), Ruby Hall (Lurgan), Harland (Belfast Whites), K. Kilner (Knock)

Fleetwood (known players):

Rance – Rollins, Brown Scott

NB: Originally this match was advertised “Ireland vs. Scotland”. The Scottish team which was to play in Belfast was the East of Scotland F.C. As they were unable to come without known reason, Fleetwood Ladies F.C. played as a substitute.

VI. Belfast, 26 October 1921 (kick-off at 3 p.m.)

Ireland and North of England vs. Dick, Kerr’s Ladies **1-6(1-3)**

Referee: W. Moore

Attendance: ca. 5,000, Windsor Park

Goals: 0-1(2.) Lily Parr, 0-2 Florence Redford, 0-3 Woods, 1-3 Ruby Hall, 1-4 – 1-6 Lily Parr (2), Florence Redford

Ireland & North of England

Florrie Rance (Fleetwood) – J. Hayden (Belfast), R. Killiner (Belfast) – Beatrice Taylor (Newcastle), Winnie McKenna (Captain / Lurgan), Isobel Montgomery (Belfast) – Maggie Shaw (Fleetwood), Harland (Belfast), Mary Lyons (Jarrow), Ruby Hall (Lurgan), K. Killiner (Belfast)

Dick, Kerr’s:

E. Price – Alice Kell (Captain), Daisy Clayton – Carmen Pomiès, Alice Woods, Jessie Walmsley – Florrie Haslam, Jennie Harris, Florrie Redford, Lily Lee, Lily Parr

VII. Belfast, 27 July 1931 (kick-off at 7:15 p.m.)

Ulster Ladies vs. Dick, Kerr’s Ladies **2-3(1-2)**

Referee: Alfred Sheppard

Linesmen: Mick Hamill, Fred McKee

Attendance: 4,500, Windsor Park

Goals: 0-1 Lily Parr, 0-2 Lily Parr, 1-2 Molly Seaton, 1-3 Sue Chorley, 2-3 Molly Seaton

Ulster:

E. Sleator (York Street) – A. Cree (Owen O’Cork), F. Donaldson (Ropeworks) – B. Herbert (Ropeworks), Molly Seaton (York Street / Captain), E. McKelvey (Owen O’Cork) – E. Morris (Jennymount), A. Kearney (York Street), J. Hynes (Ropeworks), Nellie Smyth (Ropeworks), S. Gibson (Ropeworks)

Dick, Kerr’s:

Maggie Shaw – C. Howarth, Lizzy Ashcroft – Lily Buxton, Edith Hutton, Annie Marsh – Lydia Ackers, Jennie Harris, S. Parkinson, Susan Chorley, Lily Parr

VIII. Belfast, 4 August 1932 (kick-off at 7:30 p.m.)

Ireland vs. Fémina Sport de Paris

3-4(3-2)

Referee: Mickey Hamill

Linesmen: J. Bambrick, F. Roberts

Attendance: 15,000, Grosvenor Park

Goals: 0-1 Pomiès, 1-1 Kearney, 1-2 A. Darreau, 2-2 Seaton, 3-2 Seaton, 3-3 Behr, 3-4 Goinard

Ireland:

Collins (Molly Seaton's Team) – B. Clarke (Molly Seaton's Team), F. Donaldson (Belfast Ropeworks) – Nelson (Linfield Factory), Molly Seaton (Molly Seaton's Team / Captain), J. Hinds (Ropeworks) – Bradley (Molly Seaton's Team), Nellie Smyth (Belfast Ropeworks), A. Kearney (Molly Seaton's Team), M. Rice (Belfast Ropeworks), Gladys Gordon (Bangor Ladies)

Fémina:

Derouet – Concord, Manca – Pomiès (ab 45. Behr), Gentil, Pourriot – Goinard, A. Darreau, Behr, Mirone (Olympique de Marseille), Arsac

IX. Bangor, 5 August 1932 (kick-off at 7:15 p.m.)

Ireland vs. Fémina Sport de Paris

1-0(1-0)

Referee: Mick Hamill

Attendance: 3,000, Ballyholme Showground

Goal: 1-0 Gladys Gordon

Ireland:

Collins (Molly Seaton's Team) – S. (?) Conwar (Bangor Ladies), F. Donaldson (Belfast Ropeworks) – E. McKelvey (Belfast Ropeworks), V. Brown (Bangor Ladies), B. Hume (Belfast Ropeworks) – Bradley (Molly Seaton's Team), Nellie Smyth (Belfast Ropeworks), Gladys Gordon (Bangor Ladies), M. Rice (Belfast Ropeworks), Kernohan (= A. Kearney) (Molly Seaton's Team)

Fémina:

Derouet – Concord, Manca – S. Darreau, Gaukler (Les Cadettes de Gascogne), Gentil – Goinard, A. Darreau, Behr, Mirone (Olympique de Marseille), Arsac

X. Belfast, 10 August 1936 (kick-off at 7:15 p.m.)

Ireland vs. France

1-4(1-3)

Referee: T. Pendleton

Linesmen: William “Billy” McCleery, Jimmy Warnock

Attendance: 2,000, Grosvenor Park

Goals: 0-1(10.) Hourdequin, 0-2 Hourdequin, 0-3 Hourdequin, 1-3 Seaton, 1-4 Bonnal

Ireland:

L. Vance (Irish International Ladies) -Parkington, A. Kearney (Carrickfergus) – Forsythe, Molly Seaton (Captain / Irish International Ladies), Clark – Lynch, A. Kane (Carrickfergus), A. Butler (Whitehouse), B. Clarke (Carrickfergus), M. McLaughlin (Irish International Ladies)

France:

Guyader – Merly, Bonnin (Club des X) – Chamary, Balounet, Lefebvre (Stade Châtillon) – Bonnal (Stade Châtillon), Hourdequin (Club des X), Pomiès (Captain / Fémina Sport de Paris), Sorel, Gallien (Stade Châtillon)

Note :

Not included are the matches of the Irish XI vs. a male Army selection, the matches between Rutherglen and “Ireland” and the matches after 1945 as they haven’t been played by a national selection.

Top Scorers and most capped players of the Irish national team (1917-1936)

Top Scorers:

Ruby Hall (Lurgan Blues)	6 Goals
Molly Seaton (Jennymount / Molly’s XI)	5 Goals
Winnie McKenna (Lurgan)	2 Goals

Most Caps:

Ruby Hall & Isobel Montgomery (Belfast Whites)	5 Caps
A. Kearney (York St. / Molly’s XI) & E. Riddell (Whites)	4 Caps

Irish Ladies Challenge Cup 1932

1st Round (17 June, 24 June, 8 July 1932 / all matches at Wilgar Park, Strandtown)

Bloomfield Ladies vs. Milewater Ladies

Belfast Ropeworks vs. Linfield Ladies **3-0(1-0)**

Jennymount vs. Bangor Ladies

Semifinals?

Final: Belfast, 19 August 1932 (19.30h)

Molly Seaton’s Team vs. Belfast Ropeworks Ladies **5-0(2-0)**

Referee: Mick Hamill

Att.: 2,000, Grosvenor Park

Tore: 1-0 Kearney, 2-0 Kearney, 3-0 Bradley, 4-0 Seaton, 5-0 Seaton

Molly Seaton’s Team:

Collins – Clarke, Britton – Nelson, Seaton, Morris – McLoughlin, B. Clarke, Kearney, Mawhinney, Bradley

Ropeworks:

Davis – Anderson, Donaldson – Hume, McKelvey, Magee – Torrens, Smith, Thompson, Rice, Gibson

Record Attendances at Women’s Matches (1881-1953)

Top 8 Ireland:

1921-5-21	20,000 (?), Belfast, The Oval	Belfast vs. Fleetwood
1917-9-7	16,000 Belfast Grosvenor Park	Whites vs. Stripes
1932-8-4	15,000 Belfast Grosvenor Park	Ireland vs. Fémina Paris
1917-12-26	12,000 Belfast Grosvenor Park	Ireland vs. North of England
1927-5-22	12,000, Milltown, Shamrock Park	Dublin vs. Rutherglen
1931-5-27	12,000 Belfast Pirrie Park	Ropeworks vs. Owen O’Cork
1949-8-22	12,000 Belfast Windsor Park	Ewart’s vs. Gallaher’s
1917-9-17	10,000 Belfast Grosvenor Park	Whites vs. Stripes
1921-3-29	10,000 Belfast Windsor Park	Ireland vs. North of England

Record France:

1921-10-31	15,000 Paris	Stade Pershing	France vs. Dick, Kerr’s
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Record Belgium:

1929-8-18	10,000 Turnhout	Stadsstadion	Ajax Antwerpen vs. Inno Brussels
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Record England:

1920-12-26	53,000 Liverpool	Goodison Park	Dick, Kerr’s vs. St. Helen’s
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Record Austria:

1936-7-15	4,000	Korneuburg	Sportplatz der Spielvereinigung	Austria
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Vienna vs. Rapid Vienna

On the records: The number of spectators is a big problem in women’s football in Great Britain and Ireland. For example, the Irish sources have 4,000 for the match against Fleetwood, while the Fleetwood newspaper has 20,000. There are also clues that the number of 53,000 in the Dick, Kerr’s match in Liverpool is too high, and was more in the dimension of 45,000.

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