

Outside the Bay

An offbeat look at the world of North East football inside & outside of Hillheads. . . with our recently returned to the Bay (welcome home) correspondent Paul Benneworth



My boy's first Whitley game was this season's FA cup qualifier against Hebburn Town and I worried it would be his last. He'd taken the News Guardian headlines that it was a must-win game a little too literally and I feared that any other result would put him off the Bay for life. On the wrong end of a hammering that even a giant hotdog couldn't compensate, I limited our losses by leaving after 75 minutes with us just 5-1 down and ignored the subject on the long walk home.

So I was delighted to hear he was looking forward to giving the Bay another chance. And what persuaded him - along promises of hotdogs - was that a beloved great Aunt fancied taking in a game. She was only visiting for a few days so I was surprised that she was up for non-league football. But she was a keen football fan not least because her own daughter played competitively in Canada.

Whitley Bay's own women's football team sadly folded a few years ago, but the game has been on an upward trend in recent years. When I lived in Holland, it was Lonneker ladies that was the 2pm Sunday kickoff at the village ground, then combined with beer and chips, it was as entertaining as any other fixture whilst Martha napped in her stroller. And there's a growing realisation that women's football is as entertaining as the men's game. The recent women's world cup was drawing in the highest viewing audiences this summer, certainly helped by the Lionesses progress to (and exit from) the semi-finals in an all too English way.

At our pre-summer's works party in Norway, their women's team was a hot conversation topic, not least because the Norwegian broadcaster were giving both versions of the game equal TV prominence. This followed moves two years before by Norway's FA to pay players equally, redistributing TV income more equally between the two first team squads, something very rare at any level of the professional game.

Payment remains one of women's football's key challenges, because most female players have no realistic chance to make a living in the game. Those financial considerations that led a friend of mine choose to become an academic in Spain rather than continue her highly promising professional football career. She'd been capped for Spain at U20 level and had played a year for Lazio women's first team. She made playing abroad work by registering to take some courses towards her Spanish economics degree

with Italian universities. That came in useful because after the first month, the club simply stopped paying her (and everyone else's) salary.

Being an international didn't help because the Spanish team fee was something like £15 per day when they played. In the end, she finished the season, hired a lawyer, and returned to Spain, determined never to leave her fortune hostage to miserly football bosses: football's loss was science's gain.

By contrast, Spain's top female footballers have recently been offered new deals with perks unthinkable a decade ago. It's not comparable to the deals offered to Serena Williams or Michelle Wie, but a sponsored sports car is a lot more use outside football than a suit or training kit in club colours. And increasing professionalisation of the game is translating into increasing intensity, skill and ultimately entertainment.

My last women's game was FC Twente against the mighty PSV last month in the Dutch Eredivisie. The team was sacrificed two years previously as the club furiously cut costs to avoid bankruptcy: FC Twente was saved by a local authority loan guarantee, and the council demanded in return that the club take back the women's team, and move them to a upgraded local sports ground.

As a board member of a neighbouring club (albeit without a women's team) I was invited for the season launch at the new astro turf stadium (slightly smaller than Hillheads), and I thoroughly enjoyed the game. Both teams were extremely young, giving the game an incredible speed. A local club was providing mascots to give their youth players the chance to meet footballing heroes. Most surprisingly, I really cared about the result - as a long-time FC Twente fan, PSV's winner in the dying minutes really hurt - and ultimately that's what makes watching football fun.

There's plenty of women's football played in the North East, with the professional clubs such as Newcastle United and Sunderland fielding sides in competitions along our Northern League rivals Ryton and Crawcrook Albion, Washington FC and Sunderland West End. If you haven't tried it, it's worth a look: my daughter who napped through Lonneker women's matches two years ago will soon be old enough for her first match, and it would be great if there was a good local team for her to support.

Paul